138 Pages

Pandora

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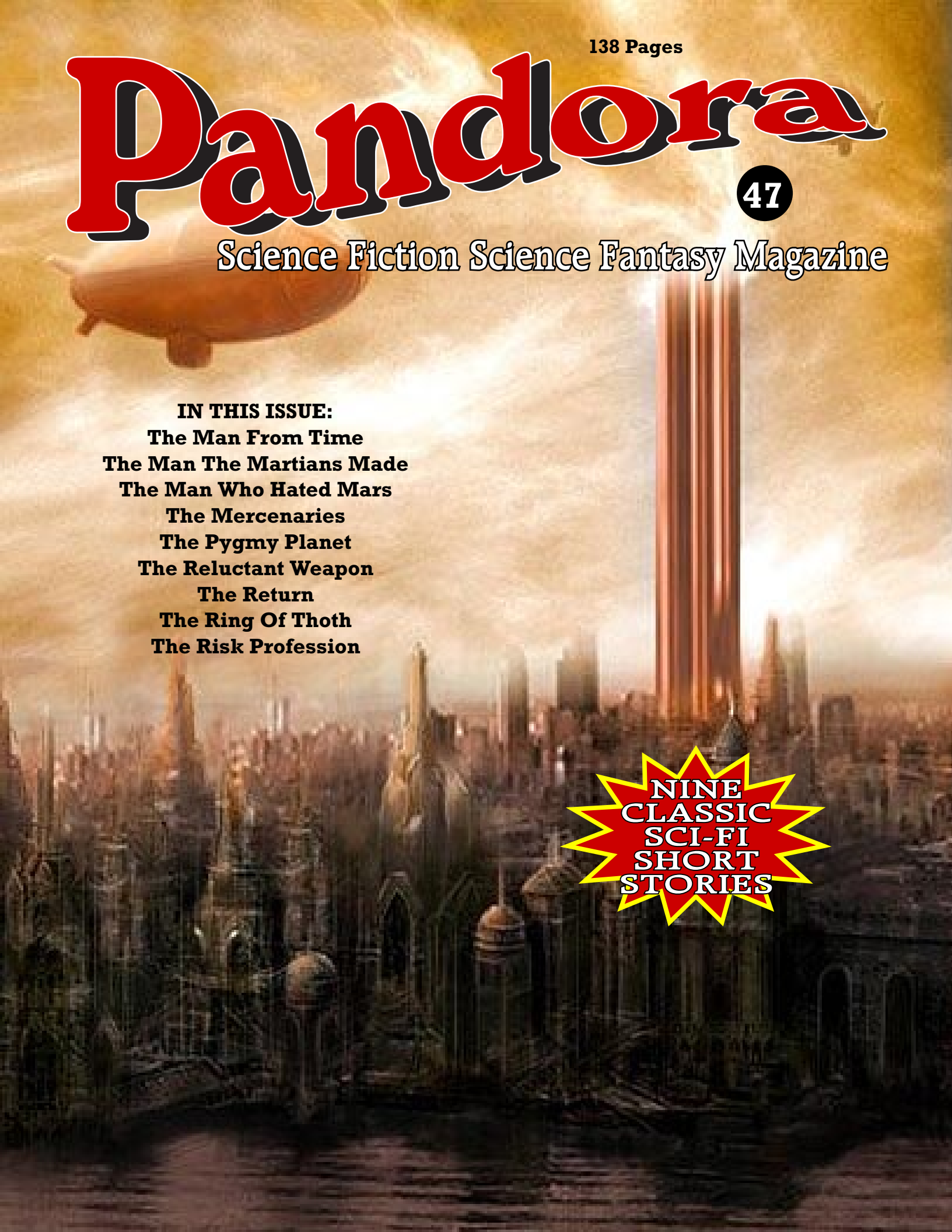
Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine



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NINE CLASSIC SCI-FI SHORT STORIES

Pandora

Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

Kerson Publishing Company • 6460-65 Convoy Court • San Diego, California 92117

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Published in the United States of America

Kerson Publishing Company
6460-65 Convoy Court
San Diego, California 92117-2312

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THE MAN FROM TIME

The method by which one man might be pinpointed in the vastness of all Eternity was the problem tackled by the versatile Frank Belknap Long in this story. And as all minds of great perceptiveness know, it would be a simple, human quality he'd find most effective even in solving Time-Space.

Deep in the Future he found the answer to Man's age-old problem.

Daring Moonson, he was called. It was a proud name, a brave name. But what good was a name that rang out like a summons to battle if the man who bore it could not repeat it aloud without fear?

Moonson had tried telling himself that a man could conquer fear if he could but once summon the courage to laugh at all the sins that ever were, and do as he damned well pleased. An ancient phrase that—damned well. It went clear back to the Elizabethan Age, and Moonson had tried picturing himself as an Elizabethan man with a ruffle at his throat and a rapier in his clasp, brawling lustily in a tavern.

In the Elizabethan Age men had thrown caution to the winds and lived with their whole bodies, not just with their minds alone. Perhaps that was why, even in the year 3689, defiant names still cropped up. Names like Independence Forest and Man, Live Forever!

It was not easy for a man to live up to a name like Man, Live Forever! But Moonson was ready to believe that it could be done. There was something in human nature which made a man abandon caution and try to live up to the claims made for him by his parents at birth.

It must be bad, Moonson thought. It must be bad if I can't control the trembling of my hands, the pounding of the blood at my temples. I am like a child shut up alone in the dark, hearing rats scurrying in a closet thick with cobwebs and the tapping of a blind man's cane on a deserted street at midnight.

Tap, tap, tap—nearer and nearer through the darkness. How soon would the rats be swarming out, blood-fanged and wholly vicious? How soon would the cane strike?

He looked up quickly, his eyes searching the shadows. For almost a month now the gleaming intricacies of the machine had given him a complete sense of security. As a scholar traveling in Time he had been accepted by his fellow travelers as a man of great courage and firm determination.

For twenty-seven days a smooth surface of shining metal had walled him in, enabling him to grapple with reality on a completely adult level. For twenty-seven days he had gone pridefully back through Time, taking creative delight in watching the heritage of the human race unroll before him like a cineramoscope under glass.

Watching a green land in the dying golden sunlight of an age lost to human memory could restore a man's strength of purpose by its serenity alone. But even an age of war and pestilence could be observed without torment from behind the protective shields of the Time Machine. Danger, accidents, catastrophe could not touch him personally.

To watch death and destruction as a spectator in a traveling Time Observatory was like watching a cobra poised to strike from behind a pane of crystal-bright glass in a zoological garden.

You got a tremendous thrill in just thinking: How dreadful if the glass should not be there! How lucky I am to be alive, with a thing so deadly and monstrous within striking distance of me!

For twenty-seven days now he had traveled without fear. Sometimes the Time Observatory would pinpoint an age and hover over it while his companions took painstaking historical notes. Sometimes it would retrace its course and circle back. A new age would come under scrutiny and more notes would be taken.

But a horrible thing that had happened to him, had awakened in him a lonely nightmare of restlessness. Childhood fears he had thought buried forever had returned to plague him and he had developed a sudden, terrible dread of the fogginess outside the moving viewpane, the way the machine itself wheeled and dipped when an ancient ruin came sweeping toward him. He had developed a fear of Time.

There was no escape from that Time Fear. The instant it came upon him he lost all interest in historical research. 1069, 732, 2407, 1928—every date terrified him. The Black Plague in London, the Great Fire, the Spanish Armada in flames off the coast of a bleak little island that would soon mold the destiny of half the world—how meaningless it all seemed in the shadow of his fear!

Had the human race really advanced so much? Time had been conquered but no man was yet wise enough to heal himself if a stark, unreasoning fear took possession of his mind and heart, giving him no peace.

Moonson lowered his eyes, saw that Rutella was watching him in the manner of a shy woman not wishing to break in too abruptly on the thoughts of a stranger.

Deep within him he knew that he had become a stranger to his own wife and the realization sharply increased his torment. He stared down at her head against his knee, at her beautiful back and sleek, dark hair. Violet eyes she had, not black as they seemed at first glance but a deep, lustrous violet.

He remembered suddenly that he was still a young man, with a young man's ardor surging strong in him. He bent swiftly, kissed her lips and eyes. As he did so her arms tightened about him until he found himself wondering what he could have done to deserve such a woman.

She had never seemed more precious to him and for an instant he could feel his fear lessening a little. But it came back and was worse than before. It was like an old pain returning at an unexpected moment to chill a man with the sickening reminder that all joy must end.

His decision to act was made quickly.

The first step was the most difficult but with a deliberate effort of will he accomplished it to his satisfaction. His secret thoughts he buried beneath a continuous mental preoccupation with the vain and the trivial. It was important to the success of his plan that his companions should suspect nothing.

The second step was less difficult. The mental block remained firm and he succeeded in carrying on actual preparations for his departure in complete secrecy.

The third step was the final one and it took him from a large compartment to a small one, from a high-arching surface of metal to a maze of intricate control mechanisms in a space so narrow that he had to crouch to work with accuracy.

Swiftly and competently his fingers moved over instruments of science which only a completely sane man would have known how to manipulate. It was an acid test of his sanity and he knew as he worked that his reasoning faculties at least had suffered no impairment.

Beneath his hands the Time Observatory's controls were solid shafts of metal. But suddenly as he worked he found himself thinking of them as fluid abstractions, each a milestone in man's long progress from the jungle to the stars. Time and space—mass and velocity.

How incredible that it had taken centuries of patient technological research to master in a practical way the tremendous implications of Einstein's original postulate. Warp space with a rapidly moving object, move away from the observer with the speed of light—and the whole of human history assumed the firm contours of a landscape in space. Time and space merged and became one. And a man in an intricately-equipped Time Observatory could revisit the past as easily as he could travel across the great curve of the universe to the farthest planet of the farthest star.

The controls were suddenly firm in his hands. He knew precisely what adjustments to make. The iris of the human eye dilates and contracts with every shift of illumination, and the Time Observatory had an iris too. That iris could be opened without endangering his companions in the least—if he took care to widen it just enough to accommodate only one sturdily built man of medium height.

Sweat came out in great beads on his forehead as he worked. The light that came through the machine's iris was faint at first, the barest glimmer of white in deep darkness. But as he adjusted controls the light grew brighter and brighter, beating in upon him until he was kneeling in a circle of radiance that dazzled his eyes and set his heart to pounding.

I've lived too long with fear, he thought. I've lived like a man imprisoned, shut away from the sunlight. Now, when freedom beckons, I must act quickly or I shall be powerless to act at all.

He stood erect, took a slow step forward, his eyes squeezed shut. Another

step, another—and suddenly he knew he was at the gateway to Time's sure knowledge, in actual contact with the past for his ears were now assailed by the high confusion of ancient sounds and voices!

He left the Time machine in a flying leap, one arm held before his face. He tried to keep his eyes covered as the ground seemed to rise to meet him. But he lurched in an agony of unbalance and opened his eyes—to see the green surface beneath him flashing like a suddenly uncovered jewel.

He remained on his feet just long enough to see his Time Observatory dim and vanish. Then his knees gave way and he collapsed with a despairing cry as the fear enveloped him ...

There were daisies in the field where he lay, his shoulders and naked chest pressed to the earth. A gentle wind stirred the grass, and the flute-like warble of a song bird was repeated close to his ear, over and over with a tireless persistence.

Abruptly he sat up and stared about him. Running parallel to the field was a winding country road and down it came a yellow and silver vehicle on wheels, its entire upper section encased in glass which mirrored the autumnal landscape with a startling clearness.

The vehicle halted directly in front of him and a man with ruddy cheeks and snow-white hair leaned out to wave at him.

"Good morning, mister!" the man shouted. "Can I give you a lift into town?"

Moonson rose unsteadily, alarm and suspicion in his stare. Very cautiously he lowered the mental barrier and the man's thoughts impinged on his mind in bewildering confusion.

He's not a farmer, that's sure ... must have been swimming in the creek, but those bathing trunks he's wearing are out of this world!

Huh! I wouldn't have the nerve to parade around in trunks like that even on a public beach. Probably an exhibitionist ... But why should he wear 'em out here in the woods? No blonds or redheads to knock silly out here!

Huh! He might have the courtesy to answer me ... Well, if he doesn't want a lift into town it's no concern of mine!

Moonson stood watching the vehicle sweep away out of sight. Obviously he had angered the man by his silence, but he could answer only by shaking his head.

He began to walk, pausing an instant in the middle of the bridge to stare down at a stream of water that rippled in the sunlight over moss-covered rocks. Tiny silver fish darted to and fro beneath a tumbling waterfall and he felt calmed and reassured by the sight. Shoulders erect now, he walked on ...

It was high noon when he reached the tavern. He went inside, saw men and women dancing in a dim light, and there was a huge, rainbow-colored musical instrument by the door which startled him by its resonance. The music was wild, weird, a little terrifying.

He sat down at a table near the door and searched the minds of the dancers for a clue to the meaning of what he saw.

The thoughts which came to him were startlingly primitive, direct and sometimes meaningless to him.

Go easy, baby! Swing it! Sure, we're in the groove now, but you never can tell! I'll buy you an orchid, honey! Not roses, just one orchid—black like your hair! Ever see a black orchid, hon? They're rare and they're expensive!

Oh, darl, darl, hold me closer! The music goes round and round! It will always be like that with us, honey! Don't ever be a square! That's all I ask! Don't ever be a square! Cuddle up to me, let yourself go! When you're dancing with one girl you should never look at another! Don't you know that, Johnny!

Sure I know it, Doll! But did I ever claim I wasn't human?

Darl, doll, doll baby! Look all you want to! But if you ever dare—

Moonson found himself relaxing a little. Dancing in all ages was closely allied to love-making, but it was pursued here with a careless rapture which he found creatively stimulating. People came here not only to dance but to eat, and the thoughts of the dancers implied that there was nothing stylized about a tavern. The ritual was a completely natural one.

In Egyptian bas-reliefs you saw the opposite in dancing. Every movement rigidly prescribed, arms held rigid and sharply bent at the elbows. Slow movements rather than lively ones, a bowing and a scraping with bowls of fruit extended in gift offerings at every turn.

There was obviously no enthroned authority here, no bejeweled king to pacify when emotions ran wild, but complete freedom to embrace joy with corybantic abandonment.

A tall man in ill-fitting black clothes approached Moonson's table, interrupting his reflections with thoughts that seemed designed to disturb and distract him out of sheer perversity. So even here there were flies in every ointment, and no dream of perfection could remain unchallenged.

He sat unmoving, absorbing the man's thoughts.

What does he think this is, a bath house? Mike says it's okay to serve them if they come in from the beach just as they are. But just one quick beer, no more. This late in the season you'd think they'd have the decency to get dressed!

The sepulchrally-dressed man gave the table a brush with a cloth he carried, then thrust his head forward like an ill-tempered scavenger bird.

"Can't serve you anything but beer. Boss's orders. Okay?"

Moonson nodded and the man went away.

Then he turned to watching the girl. She was frightened. She sat all alone, plucking nervously at the red-and-white checkered tablecloth. She sat with her back to the light, bunching the cloth up into little folds, then smoothing it out again.

She'd ground out lipstick-smudged cigarettes until the ash tray was spilling over.

Moonson began to watch the fear in her mind ...

Her fear grew when she thought that Mike wasn't gone for good. The phone call wouldn't take long and he'd be coming back any minute now. And Mike wouldn't be satisfied until she was broken into little bits. Yes, Mike wanted to

see her on her knees, begging him to kill her!

Kill me, but don't hurt Joe! It wasn't his fault! He's just a kid—he's not twenty yet, Mike!

That would be a lie but Mike had no way of knowing that Joe would be twenty-two on his next birthday, although he looked eighteen at most. There was no pity in Mike but would his pride let him hot-rod an eighteen-year-old?

Mike won't care! Mike will kill him anyway! Joe couldn't help falling in love with me, but Mike won't care what Joe could help! Mike was never young himself, never a sweet kid like Joe!

Mike killed a man when he was fourteen years old! He spent seven years in a reformatory and the kids there were never young. Joe will be just one of those kids to Mike ...

Her fear kept growing.

You couldn't fight men like Mike. Mike was strong in too many different ways. When you ran a tavern with an upstairs room for special customers you had to be tough, strong. You sat in an office and when people came to you begging for favors you just laughed. Ten grand isn't hay, buddy! My wheels aren't rigged. If you think they are get out. It's your funeral.

It's your funeral, Mike would say, laughing until tears came into his eyes.

You couldn't fight that kind of strength. Mike could push his knuckles hard into the faces of people who owed him money, and he'd never even be arrested.

Mike could take money crisp and new out of his wallet, spread it out like a fan, say to any girl crazy enough to give him a second glance: "I'm interested in you, honey! Get rid of him and come over to my table!"

He could say worse things to girls too decent and self-respecting to look at him at all.

You could be so cold and hard nothing could ever hurt you. You could be Mike Galante ...

How could she have loved such a man? And dragged Joe into it, a good kid who had made only one really bad mistake in his life—the mistake of asking her to marry him.

She shivered with a chill of self-loathing and turned her eyes hesitantly toward the big man in bathing trunks who sat alone by the door.

For a moment she met the big man's eyes and her fears seemed to fade away! She stared at him ... sunburned almost black. Muscles like a lifeguard. All alone and not on the make. When he returned her stare his eyes sparkled with friendly interest, but no suggestive, flirtatious intent.

He was too rugged to be really handsome, she thought, but he wouldn't have to start digging in his wallet to get a girl to change tables, either.

Guiltily she remembered Joe, now it could only be Joe.

Then she saw Joe enter the room. He was deathly pale and he was coming straight toward her between the tables. Without pausing to weigh his chances of staying alive he passed a man and a woman who relished Mike's company enough to make them eager to act ugly for a daily handout. They did not look up

at Joe as he passed but the man's lips curled in a sneer and the woman whispered something that appeared to fan the flames of her companion's malice.

Mike had friends—friends who would never rat on him while their police records remained in Mike's safe and they could count on him for protection.

She started to rise, to go to Joe and warn him that Mike would be coming back. But despair flooded her and the impulse died. The way Joe felt about her was a thing too big to stop ...

Joe saw her slim against the light, and his thoughts were like the sea surge, wild, unruly.

Maybe Mike will get me. Maybe I'll be dead by this time tomorrow. Maybe I'm crazy to love her the way I do ...

Her hair against the light, a tumbled mass of spun gold.

Always a woman bothering me for as long as I can remember. Molly, Anne, Janice ... Some were good for me and some were bad.

You see a woman on the street walking ahead of you, hips swaying, and you think: I don't even know her name but I'd like to crush her in my arms!

I guess every guy feels like that about every pretty woman he sees. Even about some that aren't so pretty. But then you get to know and like a woman, and you don't feel that way so much. You respect her and you don't let yourself feel that way.

Then something happens. You love her so much it's like the first time again but with a whole lot added. You love her so much you'd die to make her happy.

Joe was shaking when he slipped into the chair left vacant by Mike and reached out for both her hands.

"I'm taking you away tonight," he said. "You're coming with me."

Joe was scared, she knew. But he didn't want her to know. His hands were like ice and his fear blended with her own fear as their hands met.

"He'll kill you, Joe! You've got to forget me!" she sobbed.

"I'm not afraid of him. I'm stronger than you think. He won't dare come at me with a gun, not here before all these people. If he comes at me with his fists I'll hook a solid left to his jaw that will stretch him out cold!"

She knew he wasn't deceiving himself. Joe didn't want to die any more than she did.

The Man from Time had an impulse to get up, walk over to the two frightened children and comfort them with a reassuring smile. He sat watching, feeling their fear beating in tumultuous waves into his brain. Fear in the minds of a boy and a girl because they desperately wanted one another!

He looked steadily at them and his eyes spoke to them ...

Life is greater than you know. If you could travel in Time, and see how great is man's courage—if you could see all of his triumphs over despair and grief and pain—you would know that there is nothing to fear! Nothing at all!

Joe rose from the table, suddenly calm, quiet.

"Come on," he said quietly. "We're getting out of here right now. My car's outside and if Mike tries to stop us I'll fix him!"

The boy and the girl walked toward the door together, a young and extremely pretty girl and a boy grown suddenly to the full stature of a man.

Rather regretfully Moonson watched them go. As they reached the door the girl turned and smiled and the boy paused too—and they both smiled suddenly at the man in the bathing trunks.

Then they were gone.

Moonson got up as they disappeared, left the tavern.

It was dark when he reached the cabin. He was dog-tired, and when he saw the seated man through the lighted window a great longing for companionship came upon him.

He forgot that he couldn't talk to the man, forgot the language difficulty completely. But before this insurmountable element occurred to him he was inside the cabin.

Once there he saw that the problem solved itself—the man was a writer and he had been drinking steadily for hours. So the man did all of the talking, not wanting or waiting for an answer.

A youngish, handsome man he was, with graying temples and keenly observant eyes. The instant he saw Moonson he started to talk.

"Welcome, stranger," he said. "Been taking a dip in the ocean, eh? Can't say I'd enjoy it, this late in the season!"

Moonson was afraid at first that his silence might discourage the writer, but he did not know writers ...

"It's good to have someone to talk to," the writer went on. "I've been sitting here all day trying to write. I'll tell you something you may not know—you can go to the finest hotels, and you can open case after case of the finest wine, and you still can't get started sometimes."

The writer's face seemed suddenly to age. Fear came into his eyes and he raised the bottle to his lips, faced away from his guest as he drank as if ashamed of what he must do to escape despair every time he faced his fear.

He was trying to write himself back into fame. His greatest moment had come years before when his golden pen had glorified a generation of madcaps.

For one deathless moment his genius had carried him to the heights, and a white blaze of publicity had given him a halo of glory. Later had come lean and bitter years until finally his reputation dwindled like a gutted candle in a wintry room at midnight.

He could still write but now fear and remorse walked with him and would give him no peace. He was cruelly afraid most of the time.

Moonson listened to the writer's thoughts in heart-stricken silence—thoughts so tragic they seemed out of keeping with the natural and beautiful rhythms of his speech. He had never imagined that a sensitive and imaginative man—an artist—could be so completely abandoned by the society his genius had helped to enrich.

Back and forth the writer paced, baring his inmost thoughts ... His wife was desperately ill and the future looked completely black. How could he summon the strength of will to go on, let alone to write?

He said fiercely, "It's all right for you to talk—"

He stopped, seeming to realize for the first time that the big man sitting in an easy chair by the window had made no attempt to speak.

It seemed incredible, but the big man had listened in complete silence, and with such quiet assurance that his silence had taken on an eloquence that inspired absolute trust.

He had always known there were a few people like that in the world, people whose sympathy and understanding you could take for granted. There was a fearlessness in such people which made them stand out from the crowd, stone-markers in a desert waste to lend assurance to a tired wayfarer by its sturdy permanence, its sun-mirroring strength.

There were a few people like that in the world but you sometimes went a lifetime without meeting one. The big man sat there smiling at him, calmly exuding the serenity of one who has seen life from its tangled, inaccessible roots outward and testifies from experience that the entire growth is sound.

The writer stopped pacing suddenly and drew himself erect. As he stared into the big man's eyes his fears seemed to fade away. Confidence returned to him like the surge of the sea in great shining waves of creativeness.

He knew suddenly that he could lose himself in his work again, could tap the bright resonant bell of his genius until its golden voice rang out through eternity. He had another great book in him and it would get written now. It would get written ...

"You've helped me!" he almost shouted. "You've helped me more than you know. I can't tell you how grateful I am to you. You don't know what it means to be so paralyzed with fright that you can't write at all!"

The Man from Time was silent but his eyes shone curiously.

The writer turned to a bookcase and removed a volume in a faded cover that had once been bright with rainbow colors. He sat down and wrote an inscription on the flyleaf.

Then he rose and handed the book to his visitor with a slight bow. He was smiling now.

"This was my first-born!" he said.

The Man from Time looked at the title first ... THIS SIDE OF PARADISE.

Then he opened the book and read what the author had written on the flyleaf:

With warm gratefulness for a courage which brought back the sun.

F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Moonson bowed his thanks, turned and left the cabin.

Morning found him walking across fresh meadowlands with the dew glistening on his bare head and broad, straight shoulders.

They'd never find him, he told himself hopelessly. They'd never find him because Time was too vast to pinpoint one man in such a vast waste of years. The towering crests of each age might be visible but there could be no returning to one tiny insignificant spot in the mighty ocean of Time.

As he walked his eyes searched for the field and the winding road he'd followed into town. Only yesterday this road had seemed to beckon and he had followed, eager to explore an age so primitive that mental communication from

mind to mind had not yet replaced human speech.

Now he knew that the speech faculty which mankind had long outgrown would never cease to act as a barrier between himself and the men and women of this era of the past. Without it he could not hope to find complete understanding and sympathy here.

He was still alone and soon winter would come and the sky grow cold and empty ...

The Time machine materialized so suddenly before him that for an instant his mind refused to accept it as more than a torturing illusion conjured up by the turbulence of his thoughts. All at once it towered in his path, bright and shining, and he moved forward over the dew-drenched grass until he was brought up short by a joy so overwhelming that it seemed to him that his heart must burst.

Rutella emerged from the machine with a gay little laugh, as if his stunned expression was the most amusing in the world.

"Hold still and let me kiss you, darling," her mind said to his.

She stood in the dew-bright grass on tiptoe, her sleek dark hair falling to her shoulders, an extraordinarily pretty girl to be the wife of a man so tormented.

"You found me!" his thoughts exulted. "You came back alone and searched until you found me!"

She nodded, her eyes shining. So Time wasn't too vast to pinpoint after all, not when two people were so securely wedded in mind and heart that their thoughts could build a bridge across Time.

"The Bureau of Emotional Adjustment analyzed everything I told them. Your psycho-graph ran to fifty-seven pages, but it was your desperate loneliness which guided me to you."

She raised his hand to her lips and kissed it.

"You see, darling, a compulsive fear isn't easy to conquer. No man or woman can conquer it alone. Historians tell us that when the first passenger rocket started out for Mars, Space Fear took men by surprise in the same way your fear gripped you. The loneliness, the utter desolation of space, was too much for a human mind to endure."

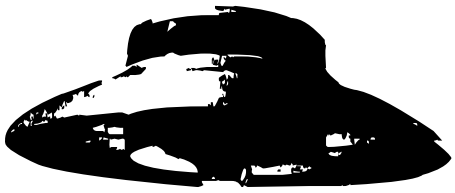
She smiled her love. "We're going back. We'll face it together and we'll conquer it together. You won't be alone now. Darling, don't you see—it's because you aren't a clod, because you're sensitive and imaginative that you experience fear. It's not anything to be ashamed of. You were simply the first man on Earth to develop a new and completely different kind of fear—Time Fear."

Moonson put out his hand and gently touched his wife's hair.

Ascending into the Time Observatory a thought came unbidden into his mind: Others he saved, himself he could not save.

But that wasn't true at all now.

He could help himself now. He would never be alone again! When guided by the sure hand of love and complete trust, self-knowledge could be a shining weapon. The trip back might be difficult, but holding tight to his wife's hand he felt no misgivings, no fear.



THE MAN THE MARTIANS MADE

1

No mortal had ever seen the Martians, but they had heard their whisperings—without knowing the terrible secret they kept hidden.

There was death in the camp.

I knew when I awoke that it had come to stand with us in the night and was waiting now for the day to break and flood the desert with light. There was a prickling at the base of my scalp and I was drenched with cold sweat.

I had an impulse to leap up and go stumbling about in the darkness. But I disciplined myself. I crossed my arms and waited for the sky to grow bright.

Daybreak on Mars is like nothing you've ever dreamed about. You wake up in the morning, and there it is—bright and clear and shining. You pinch yourself, you sit up straight, but it doesn't vanish.

Then you stare at your hands with the big callouses. You reach for a mirror to take a look at your face. That's not so good. That's where ugliness enters the picture. You look around and you see Ralph. You see Harry. You see the women.

On Earth a woman may not look her glamorous best in the harsh light of early dawn, but if she's really beautiful she doesn't look too bad. On Mars even the most beautiful woman looks angry on arising, too weary and tormented by human shortcomings to take a prefabricated metal shack and turn it into a real home for a man.

You have to make allowances for a lot of things on Mars. You have to start right off by accepting hardship and privation as your daily lot. You have to get accustomed to living in construction camps in the desert, with the red dust making you feel all hollow and dried up inside. Making you feel like a drum, a shriveled pea pod, a salted fish hung up to dry. Dust inside of you, rattling around, canal water seepage rotting the soles of your boots.

So you wake up and you stare. The night before you'd collected driftwood and stacked it by the fire. The driftwood has disappeared. Someone has stolen your very precious driftwood. The Martians? Guess again.

You get up and you walk straight up to Ralph with your shoulders squared. You say, "Ralph, why in hell did you have to steal my driftwood?"

In your mind you say that. You say it to Dick, you say it to Harry. But what you really say is, "Larsen was here again last night!"

You say, I put a fish on to boil and Larsen ate it. I had a nice deck of cards, all shiny and new, and Larsen marked them up. It wasn't me cheating. It was Larsen hoping I'd win so that he could waylay me in the desert and get all of the money away from me.

You have a girl. There aren't too many girls in the camps with laughter and light and fire in them. But there are a few, and if you're lucky you take a fancy to one particular girl—her full red lips and her spun gold hair. All of a sudden she disappears. Somebody runs off with her. It's

Larsen.

In every man there is a slumbering giant. When life roars about you on a world that's rugged and new you've got to go on respecting the lads who have thrown in their lot with you, even when their impulses are as harsh as the glint of sunlight on a desert-polished tombstone.

You think of a name—Larsen. You start from scratch and you build Larsen up until you have a clear picture of him in your mind. You build him up until he's a great shouting, brawling, golden man like Paul Bunyon.

Even a wicked legend can seem golden on Mars. Larsen wasn't just my slumbering giant—or Dick's, or Harry's. He was the slumbering giant in all of us, and that's what made him so tremendous. Anything gigantic has beauty and power and drive to it.

Alone we couldn't do anything with Larsen's gusto, so when some great act of wickedness was done with gusto how could it be us? Here comes Larsen! He'll shoulder all the guilt, but he won't feel guilty because he's the first man in Eden, the child who never grew up, the laughing boy, Hercules balancing the world on his shoulders and looking for a woman with long shining tresses and eyes like the stars of heaven to bend to his will.

If such a woman came to life in Hercules' arms would you like the job of stopping him from sending the world crashing? Would you care to try?

Don't you see? Larsen was closer to us than breathing and as necessary as food and drink and our dreams of a brighter tomorrow. Don't think we didn't hate him at times. Don't think we didn't curse and revile him. You may glorify a legend from here to eternity, but the luster never remains completely untarnished.

Larsen wouldn't have seemed completely real to us if we hadn't given him muscles that could tire and eyes that could blink shut in weariness. Larsen had to sleep, just as we did. He'd disappear for days.

We'd wink and say, "Larsen's getting a good long rest this time. But he'll be back with something new up his sleeve, don't you worry!"

We could joke about it, sure. When Larsen stole or cheated we could pretend we were playing a game with loaded dice—not really a deadly game, but a game full of sound and fury with a great rousing outburst of merriment at the end of it.

But there are deadlier games by far. I lay motionless, my arms locked across my chest, sweating from every pore. I stared at Harry. We'd been working all night digging a well, and in a few days water would be bubbling up sweet and cool and we wouldn't have to go to the canal to fill our cooking utensils. Harry was blinking and stirring and I could tell just by looking at him that he was uneasy too. I looked beyond him at the circle of shacks.

Most of us were sleeping in the open, but there were a few youngsters in the shacks and women too worn out with drudgery to care much whether they slept in smothering darkness or under the clear cold light of the stars.

I got slowly to my knees, scooped up a handful of sand, and let it dribble slowly through my fingers. Harry looked straight at me and his eyes widened in

alarm. It must have been the look on my face. He arose and crossed to where I was sitting, his mouth twitching slightly. There was nothing very reassuring about Harry. Life had not been kind to him and he had resigned himself to accepting the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune without protest. He had one of those emaciated, almost skull-like faces which terrify children, and make women want to cry.

"You don't look well, Tom," he said. "You've been driving yourself too hard."

I looked away quickly. I had to tell him, but anything terrifying could demoralize Harry and make him throw his arm before his face in blind panic. But I couldn't keep it locked up inside me an instant longer.

"Sit down, Harry," I whispered. "I want to talk to you. No sense in waking the others."

"Oh," he said.

He squatted beside me on the sand, his eyes searching my face. "What is it, Tom?"

"I heard a scream," I said. "It was pretty awful. Somebody has been hurt—bad. It woke me up, and that takes some doing."

Harry nodded. "You sleep like a log," he said.

"I just lay still and listened," I said, "with my eyes wide open. Something moved out from the well—a two-legged something. It didn't make a sound. It was big, Harry, and it seemed to melt into the shadows. I don't know what kept me from leaping up and going after it. It had something to do with the way I felt. All frozen up inside."

Harry appeared to understand. He nodded, his eyes darting toward the well. "How long ago was that?"

"Ten—fifteen minutes."

"You just waited for me to wake up?"

"That's right," I said. "There was something about the scream that made me want to put off finding out. Two's company—and when you're alone with something like that it's best to talk it over before you act."

I could see that Harry was pleased. Unnerved too, and horribly shaken. But he was pleased that I had turned to him as a friend I could trust. When you can't depend on life for anything else it's good to know you have a friend.

I brushed sand from my trousers and got up. "Come on," I said. "We'll take a look."

It was an ordeal for him. His face twitched and his eyes wavered. He knew I hadn't lied about the scream. If a single scream could unnerve me that much it had to be bad.

We walked to the well in complete silence. There were shadows everywhere, chill and forbidding. Almost like people they seemed, whispering together, huddling close in ominous gossipy silence, aware of what we would find.

It was a sixty-foot walk from the fire to the well. A walk in the sun—a walk in the bright hot sun of Mars, with utter horror perhaps at the end of it.

The horror was there. Harry made a little choking noise deep in his throat, and my heart started pounding like a bass drum.

2

The man on the sand had no top to his

head. His skull had been crushed and flattened so hideously that he seemed like a wooden figure resting there—an anatomical dummy with its skull-case lifted off.

We looked around for the skull-case, hoping we'd find it, hoping we'd made a mistake and stumbled by accident into an open-air dissecting laboratory and were looking at ghastly props made of plastic and glittering metal instead of bone and muscle and flesh.

But the man on the sand had a name. We'd known him for weeks and talked to him. He wasn't a medical dummy, but a corpse. His limbs were hideously convulsed, his eyes wide and staring. The sand beneath his head was clotted with dried blood. We looked for the weapon which had crushed his skull but couldn't find it.

We looked for the weapon before we saw the footprints in the sand. Big they were—incredibly large and massive. A man with a size-twelve shoe might have left such prints if the leather had become a little soggy and spread out around the soles.

"The poor guy," Harry whispered.

I knew how he felt. We had all liked Ned. A harmless little guy with a great love of solitude, a guy who hadn't a malicious hair in his head. A happy little guy who liked to sing and dance in the light of a high-leaping fire. He had a banjo and was good at music making. Who could have hated Ned with a rage so primitive and savage? I looked at Harry and saw that he was wondering the same thing.

Harry looked pretty bad, about ready to cave in. He was leaning against the well, a tormented fury in his eyes.

"The murderous bastard," he muttered. "I'd like to get him by the throat and choke the breath out of him. Who'd want to do a thing like that to Ned."

"I can't figure it either," I said.

Then I remembered. I don't think Molly Egan really could have loved Ned. The curious thing about it was that Ned didn't even need the kind of love she could have given him. He was a self-sufficient little guy despite his frailness and didn't really need a woman to look after him. But Molly must have seen something pathetic in him.

Molly was a beautiful woman in her own right, and there wasn't a man in the camp who hadn't envied Ned. It was puzzling, but it could have explained why Ned was lying slumped on the sand with a bashed-in skull. It could have explained why someone had hated him enough to kill him.

Without lifting a finger Ned had won Molly's love. That could make some other guy as mad as a caged hyena—the wrong sort of other guy. Even a small man could have shattered Ned's skull, but the prints on the sand were big.

How many men in the camp wore size-twelve shoes? That was the sixty-four dollar question, and it hung in the shimmering air between Harry and myself like an unspoken challenge. We could almost see the curve of the big question mark suspended in the dazzle.

I thought awhile, looking at Harry. Then I took a long, deep breath and said, "We'd better talk it over with Bill Seaton first. If it gets around too fast those footprints will be trampled flat. And if tempers start rising anything could happen."

Harry nodded. Bill was the kind of guy you could depend on in an emergency. Cool, poised, efficient, with an air of authority that commanded respect. He could be pigheaded at times, but his sense of justice was as keen as a whip.

Harry and I walked very quietly across a stretch of tumbled sand and halted at the door to Bill's shack. Bill was a bachelor and we knew there'd be no woman inside to put her foot down and tell him he'd be a fool to act as a lawman. Or would there be? We had to chance it.

Law-enforcement is a thankless job whether on Earth or on Mars. That's why it attracts the worst—and the best. If you're a power-drunk sadist you'll take the job just for the pleasure it gives you. But if you're really interested in keeping violence within bounds so that fairly decent lads get a fighting chance to build for the future, you'll take the job with no thought of reward beyond the simple satisfaction of lending a helping hand.

Bill Seaton was such a man, even if he did enjoy the limelight and liked to be in a position of command.

"Come on, Harry," I said. "We may as well wake him up and get it over with."

We went into the shack. Bill was sleeping on the floor with his long legs drawn up. His mouth was open and he was snoring lustily. I couldn't help thinking how much he looked like an overgrown grasshopper. But that was just a first impression springing from overwrought nerves.

I bent down and shook Bill awake. I grabbed his arm and shook him until his jaw snapped shut and he shot up straight, suddenly galvanized. Instantly the grotesque aspect fell from him. Dignity came upon him and enveloped him like a cloak.

"Ned, you say? The poor little cuss! So help me—if I get my hands on the rat who did it I'll roast him over a slow fire!"

He got up, staggered to an equipment locker, and took out a sun helmet and a pair of shorts. He dressed quickly, swearing constantly and staring out the door at the bright dawn glow as if he wanted to send both of his fists crashing into the first suspicious guy to cross his path.

"We can't have those footprints trampled," he muttered. "There are a lot of dumb bastards here who don't know the first thing about keeping pointers intact. Those prints may be the only thing we'll have to go on."

"Just the three of us can handle it, Bill," I said. "When you decide what should be done we can wake the others."

Bill nodded. "Keeping it quiet is the important thing. We'll carry him back here. When we break the news I want that body out of sight."

Harry and Bill and I—we took another walk in the sun. I looked at Harry, and the greenish tinge which had crept into his face gave me a jolt. He's taking this pretty hard, I thought. If I hadn't known him so well I might have jumped to an ugly conclusion. But I just couldn't imagine Harry quarreling with Ned over Molly.

How was I taking it myself? I raised my hand and looked at it. There was no tremor. Nerves steady, brain clear. No pleasure in enforcing the law—pass that buck to Bill. But there was a gruesome job ahead, and I was standing up to it as well as could be expected.

Ever try lifting a corpse? The corpse of a stranger is easier to lift than the

corpse of a man you've known and liked. Harry and I lifted him together. Between us the dead weight didn't seem too intolerable—not at first. But it quickly became a terrible, heavy limpness that dragged at our arms like some soggy log dredged up from the dark waters of the canal.

We carried him into the shack and eased him down on the floor. His head fell back and his eyes lolled.

Death is always shameful. It strips away all human reticences and makes a mockery of human dignity and man's rebellion against the cruelty of fate.

For a moment we stood staring down at all that was left of Ned. I looked at Bill. "How many men in the camp wear number-twelve shoes?"

"We'll find out soon enough."

All this time we hadn't mentioned Larsen. Not one word about Larsen, not one spoken word. Cheating, yes. Lying, and treacherous disloyalty, and viciousness, and spite. Fights around the campfires at midnight, battered faces and broken wrists and a cursing that never ceased. All that we could blame on Larsen. But a harmless little guy lying dead by a well in a spreading pool of blood—that was an outrage that stopped us dead in our legend-making tracks.

There is something in the human mind which recoils from too outrageous a deception. How wonderful it would have been to say, "Larsen was here again last night. He found a little guy who had never harmed anyone standing by a well in the moonlight. Just for sheer delight he decided to kill the little guy right then and there." Just to add luster to the legend, just to send a thrill of excitement about the camp.

No, that would have been the lie colossal which no sane man could have quite believed.

Something happened then to further unnerve us.

The most disturbing sound you can hear on Mars is the whispering. Usually it begins as a barely audible murmur and swells in volume with every shift of the wind. But now it started off high pitched and insistent and did not stop.

It was the whispering of a dying race. The Martians are as elusive as elves and all the pitiless logic of science had failed to draw them forth into the sunlight to stand before men in uncompromising arrogance as peers of the human race.

That failure was a tragedy in itself. If man's supremacy is to be challenged at all let it be by a creature of flesh-and-blood, a big-brained biped who must kill to live. Better that by far than a ghostly flickering in the deepening dusk, a whispering and a flapping and a long-drawn sighing prophesying death.

Oh, the Martians were real enough. A flitting vampire bat is real, or a stinging ray in the depths of a blue lagoon. But who could point to a Martian and say, "I have seen you plain, in broad daylight. I have looked into your owlish eyes and watched you go flitting over the sand on your thin, stalklike legs? I know there is nothing mysterious about you. You are like a water insect skimming the surface of a pond in a familiar meadow on Earth. You are quick and alert, but no match for a man. You are no more than an interesting insect."

Who could say that, when there were ruins buried deep beneath the sand to give the lie to any such idea. First the ru-

ins, and then the Martians themselves, always elusive, gnomelike, goblinlike, flitting away into the dissolving dusk.

You're a comparative archaeologist and you're on Mars with the first batch of rugged youngsters to come tumbling out of a spaceship with stardust in their eyes. You see those youngsters digging wells and sweating in the desert. You see the prefabricated housing units go up, the tangle of machinery, the camp sites growing lusty with midnight brawls and skull-cracking escapades. You see the towns in the desert, the law-enforcement committees, the camp followers, the reform fanatics.

You're a sober-minded scholar, so you start digging in the ruins. You bring up odd-looking cylinders, rolls of threaded film, instruments of science so complex they make you giddy.

You wonder about the Martians—what they were like when they were a young and proud race. If you're an archaeologist you wonder. But Bill and I—we were youngsters still. Oh, sure, we were in our thirties, but who would have suspected that? Bill looked twenty-seven and I hadn't a gray hair in my head.

3

Bill nodded at Harry. "You'd better stay here. Tom and I will be asking some pointed questions, and our first move will depend on the answers we get. Don't let anyone come snooping around this shack. If anyone sticks his head in and starts to turn ugly, warn him just once—then shoot to kill." He handed Harry a gun.

Harry nodded grimly and settled himself on the floor close to Ned. For the first time since I'd known him, Harry looked completely sure of himself.

As we emerged from the shack the whispering was so loud the entire camp had been placed on the alert. There would be no need for us to go into shack after shack, watching surprise and shock come into their eyes.

A dozen or more men were between Bill's shack and the well. They were staring grimly at the dawn, as if they could already see blood on the sky, spilling over on the sand and spreading out in a sinister pool at their feet. A mirage-like pool mirroring their own hidden forebodings, mirroring a knotted rope and the straining shoulders of men too vengeful to know the meaning of restraint.

Jim Kenny stood apart and alone, about forty feet from the well, staring straight at us. His shirt was open at the throat, exposing a patch of hairy chest, and his big hands were wedged deeply into his belt. He stood about six feet three, very powerful, and with large feet.

I nudged Bill's arm. "What do you think?" I asked.

Kenny did seem a likely suspect. Molly had caught his eye right from the start, and he had lost no time in pursuing her. A guy like Kenny would have felt that losing out to a man of his own breed would have been a terrible blow to his pride. But just imagine Kenny losing out to a little guy like Ned. It would have infuriated him and glazed his eyes with a red film of hate.

Bill answered my question slowly, his eyes on Kenny's cropped head. "I think we'd better take a look at his shoes," he said.

We edged up slowly, taking care not

to disturb the others, pretending we were sauntering toward the well on a before-breakfast stroll.

It was then that Molly came out of her shack. She stood blinking for an instant in the dawn glare, her unbound hair falling in a tumbled dark mass to her shoulders, her eyes still drowsy with sleep. She wore rust-colored slippers and a form-fitted yellow robe, belted in at the waist.

Molly wasn't beautiful exactly. But there was something pulse-stirring about her and it was easy to understand how a man like Kenny might find her difficult to resist.

Bill slanted a glance at Kenny, then shrugged and looked straight at Molly. He turned to me, his voice almost a whisper, "She's got to be told, Tom. You do it. She likes you a lot."

I'd been wondering about that myself—just how much she liked me. It was hard to be sure.

Bill saw my hesitation, and frowned. "You can tell if she's covering up. Her reaction may give us a lead."

Molly looked startled when she saw me approaching without the mask I usually wore when I waltzed her around and grinned and ruffled her hair and told her that she was the cutest kid imaginable and would make some man—not me—a fine wife.

That made telling her all the harder. The hardest part was at the end—when she stared at me dry-eyed and threw her arms around me as if I was the last support left to her on Earth.

For a moment I almost forgot we were not on Earth. On Earth I might have been able to comfort her in a completely sane way. But on Mars when a woman comes into your arms your emotions can turn molten in a matter of seconds.

"Steady," I whispered. "We're just good friends, remember?"

"I'd be willing to forget, Tom," she said.

"You've had a terrible shock," I whispered. "You really loved that little guy—more than you know. It's natural enough that you should feel a certain warmth toward me. I just happened to be here—so you kissed me."

"No, Tom. It isn't that way at all—"

I might have let myself go a little then if Kenny hadn't seen us. He stood very still for an instant, staring at Molly. Then his eyes narrowed and he walked slowly toward us, his hands still wedged in his belt.

I looked quickly at Molly, and saw that her features had hardened. There was a look of dark suspicion in her eyes. Bill had been watching Kenny, too, waiting for him to move. He measured footsteps with Kenny, advancing in the same direction from a different angle at a pace so calculated that they seemed to meet by accident directly in front of us.

Bill didn't draw but his hand never left his hip. His voice came clear and sharp and edged with cold insistence. "Know anything about it, Kenny?"

Strain seemed to tighten Kenny's face, but there was no panic in his eyes, no actual glint of fear. "What made you think I'd know?" he asked.

Bill didn't say a word. He just started staring at Kenny's shoes. He stood back a bit and continued to stare as if something vitally important had escaped him

and taken refuge beneath the soggy leather around Kenny's feet.

"What size shoes do you wear, Jim?" he asked.

Kenny must have suspected that the question was charged with as much explosive risk as a detonating wire set to go off at the faintest jar. His eyes grew shrewd and mocking.

"So the guy who did it left prints in the sand?" he said. "Prints made by big shoes?"

"That's right," Bill said. "You have a very active mind."

Kenny laughed then, the mockery deepening in his stare. "Well," he said, "suppose we have a look at those prints, and if it will ease your mind I'll take off my shoes and you can try them out for size."

Kenny and Bill and I walked slowly from Molly's shack to the well in the hot and blazing glare, and the whispering went right on, getting under our skin in a tormenting sort of way.

Kenny still wore that disturbing grin. He looked at the prints and grunted. "Yeah," he said, "they sure are big. Biggest prints I've ever seen."

He sat down and started unlacing his shoes. First the right shoe, then the left. He pulled off both shoes and handed them to Bill.

"Fit them in," he said. "Measure them for size. Measure me for size, and to hell with you!"

Bill made a careful check. There were eight prints, and he fitted the shoes painstakingly into each of them. There was space to spare at each try.

It cleared Kenny completely. He wasn't a killer—this time. We might have roused the camp to a lynching fury and Kenny would have died for a crime another man had committed. I shut my eyes and saw Larsen swinging from a roof top, a black hood over his face. I saw Molly standing in the sunlight by my side, her face a stony mask.

I opened my eyes and there was Kenny, grinning contemptuously at us. He'd called our bluff and won out. Now the shoe was on the other foot.

A cold chill ran up my spine. It was Kenny who was doing the staring now, and he was looking directly at my shoes. He stood back a bit and continued to stare. He was dramatizing his sudden triumph in a way that turned my blood to ice.

Then I saw that Bill was staring too—straight at the shoes of a man he had known for three years and grown to like and trust. But underlying the warmth and friendliness in Bill was a granite-like integrity which nothing could shake.

It was Bill who spoke first. "I guess you'd better take them off, Tom," he said. "We may as well be thorough about this."

Sure, I was big. I grew up fast as a kid and at eighteen I weighed two hundred and thirty pounds, all lean flesh. If shoes ran large I could sometimes cram my feet into size twelves, but I felt much more comfortable in a size or two larger than that.

What made it worse, Molly liked me. I was involved with her, but no one knew how much. No one knew whether we'd quarreled or not, or how insanely jealous I could be. No one knew whether Molly had only pretended to like Ned while carrying a torch for me, and how danger-

ously complex the situation might have become all along the line.

I stood very still, listening. The whispering was so loud now it drowned out the sighing of the wind. I looked down at my shoes. They were caked with mud and soggy and discolored. Day after day I'd trudge back and forth from the canal to the shacks in the blazing sunlight without giving my feet a thought until the ache in them had become intolerable, rest an absolute necessity.

There was only one thing to do—call Kenny's bluff so fast he wouldn't have time to hurl another accusation at me.

I handed Bill both of my shoes. He looked at me and nodded. I waited, listening to the whispering rise and fall, watching him stoop and fit the shoes into the prints on the sand.

He straightened suddenly. His face was expressionless, but I could see that he was waging a terrible inward struggle with himself.

"Your shoes come pretty close to filling out those prints, Tom," he said. "I can't be sure—but a wax impression test should pretty well clear this up." He gripped my arm and nodded toward the shacks. "Better stick close to me."

Kenny took a slow step backward, his jaw tightening, his eyes searching Bill's face. "Wax impression test, hell!" he said. "You've got your murderer. I'm going to see he gets what's coming to him—right now!"

Bill shook his head. "I'll do this my way," he said.

Kenny glared at him, then laughed harshly. "You won't have a chance," he said. "The boys won't stand for it. I'm going to spread the word around, and you'd better not try to stop me."

That did it. I'd been holding myself in, but I had a sudden, overpowering urge to send my fist crashing into Kenny's face, to send him crashing to the sand. I started for him, but he jumped back and started shouting.

I can't remember exactly what he shouted. But he said just enough to put a noose around my neck. Every man and woman between the shacks and the well swung about to stare at me. I saw shock and rage flare in the eyes of men who usually had steady nerves. They were not calm now—not one of them.

4

It all happened so fast I was caught off balance. In the harsh Martian sunlight human emotions can be as unstable as a wind-lashed dune.

A crazy thought flashed through my mind: Will Molly believe this too? Will she join these madmen in their wild thirst for vengeance? My need for her was suddenly overwhelming. Just seeing her face would have helped, but now more men had emerged from the shacks and I couldn't see beyond them. They were heading straight for me and I knew that even Bill would be powerless to stop them.

You can't argue with an avalanche. It was rolling straight toward me, gathering momentum as it came—not one man or a dozen, but a solid wall of human hate and unreason.

Bill stood his ground. He had drawn his gun, and he started shouting that the prints couldn't have been made by my shoes. I chalked that up to his credit and

resolved never to forget it.

I knew I'd have to make a dash for it. I ran as fast as I could, keeping my eyes on the glimmer of sunlight on rising dunes, and deep hollows which a carefully placed bullet could have quickly changed into a burial mound.

A sudden crackling burst of gunfire ripped through the air. Directly in my path the sand geysered up as the bullets ripped and tore at it. Somebody wasn't a good marksman, or had let blind rage unnerve him and spoil his aim. A lot of somebodies—for the firing increased and became almost continuous for an instant, a dull crackling which drowned out the whispering and the sighing of the wind.

Then abruptly all sound ceased. Utter stillness descended on the desert—an unnatural, terrifying stillness, as if nature herself had stopped breathing and was waiting for someone to scream.

I must have been mad to turn. A weaving target has a chance, but a target standing motionless is a sitting duck and his life hangs by a hair. But still I turned.

Something was happening between the well and the shacks which halted the pursuit dead in its tracks. One of the shacks was wrapped in darting tongues of flame, and a woman was screaming, and a man close to her was grappling with something huge and misshapen which loomed starkly against the dawn glow.

A human shape? I could not be sure. It seemed monstrous, with a bulge between its shoulders which gave a grotesque and distorted aspect to the shadow which its weaving bulk cast upon the sand. I could see the shadow clearly across three hundred feet of sand. It lengthened and shortened, as if an octopus-like ferocity had given it the power to distort itself at will, lengthening its tentacles and then whipping them back again.

But it was not an octopus. It had legs and arms, and it was crushing the man in a grip of steel. I could see that now. I stared as the others were staring, their backs turned to me, their blind hatred for me blotted out by that greater horror.

I suddenly realized that the shape was human. It had the head and shoulders of a man, and a torso that could twist with muscular purpose, and massive hands that could maul and maim. It threw the hapless man from it with a sudden convulsive contraction of its entire bulk. I had never seen a human being move in quite that way, but even as its violence flared its manlike aspect became more pronounced.

A frightful thing happened then. The woman screamed and rushed toward the brutish maniac with her fingers splayed. The swaying figure bent, grabbed her about the waist, and lifted her high into the air. I thought for a moment he was about to crush her as he had crushed the man. But I was wrong. She was hurled to the sand, but with a violence so brutal that she went instantly limp.

Then the brutal madman turned, and I saw his face. If ever monstrous cruelty and malign cunning looked out of a human countenance it looked out of the eyes that stared in my direction, remorseless in their hate.

I could not tear my gaze from his face. The hate in it could be sensed, even across a blinding haze of sunlight that blotted out the sharp contours of physi-

cal things. But more than hate could be sensed. There was something tremendous about that face, as if the evil which had ravaged it had left the searing brand of Lucifer himself!

For an instant the madman stood motionless, his ghastly brutality unchallenged. Then Jeff Winters started for it. Jeff had come to Mars alone and grown more solitary with every passing day. He was a brooding, ingrown man, secretive and sullen, with a streak of wildness which he usually managed to control. He went for the madman like a gigantic terrier pup, shaggy and ferocious and contemptuous of death.

The big figure turned quickly, raised his arm, and brought his closed fist down on Jeff's skull. Jeff collapsed like a shattered plaster cast. His body seemed to break and splinter, and he sprawled forward on the sand.

He did not get up.

Frank Anders had guns on both hips, and he drew them fast. No one knew what kind of man Anders was. He hardly ever complained or made a spectacle of himself. A little guy with sandy hair and cold blue eyes, he had an accuracy of aim that did his talking for him.

His guns suddenly roared. For an instant the air between his hands and the maniac was a crackling wall of flame. The brute swayed a little but did not turn aside. He went straight for Anders with both arms spread wide.

He caught Anders about the waist, lifted him up, and slammed his body down against the sand. A sickness came over me as I stared. The madman bashed Anders' head against the ground again and again. Then suddenly the big arms relaxed and Anders sagged limply to the ground.

For an instant the madman swayed slowly back and forth, like a blood-stained marionette on a wire. Then he moved forward with a terrible, shambling gait, his head lowered, a dark, misshapen shadow seeming to lengthen before him on the sand like a spindle of flame.

The clearing was abruptly tumultuous with sound. The fury which had been unleashed against me turned upon the monster and became a closed circle of deadly, intent purpose hemming him in—and he was caught in a crossfire that hurled him backwards to the sand.

He jumped up and lunged straight for the well. What happened then was like the awakening stages of some horrible dream. The madman shambled past the well, the air at his back a crackling sheet of flame. The barrage behind him was continuous and merciless. The men were organized now, standing together in a solid wall, firing with deadly accuracy and a grim purpose which transcended fear.

The madman went clumping on past me and climbed a dune with his shoulders held straight. With a sunset glare deepening about him, he went striding over the dune and out of sight.

I turned and stared back at the camp. The pursuit had passed the well and was headed for me. But no one paid the slightest attention to me. Twelve men passed me, walking three abreast. Bill came along in their wake, his eyes stony hard. He reached out as he passed me, gripping my shoulder, giving me a foot-of-the-gallows kind of smile.

"We know now who killed Ned," he whispered. "We know, fella. Take it easy, relax."

My head was throbbing, but I could see the big prints from where I stood—the prints of a murderer betrayed by his insatiable urge to slay.

I saw Kenny pass, and he gave me a contemptuous grin. He had done his best to destroy me, but there was no longer any hate left in me.

I took a slow step forward—and fell flat on my face....

I woke up with my head in Molly's lap. She was looking down into my face, sobbing in a funny sort of way and running her fingers through my hair.

She looked startled when she saw that I was wide awake. She blinked furiously and started fumbling at her waist for a handkerchief.

"I must have passed out cold," I said. "It's quite a strain to be at the receiving end of a lynching bee. And what I saw afterwards wasn't exactly pleasant."

"Darling," she whispered, "don't move, don't say a word. You're going to be all right."

"You bet I am!" I said. "Right now I feel great."

My arm went around her shoulder, and I drew her head down until her breath was warm on my face. I kissed her hair and lips and eyes for a full minute in utter recklessness.

When I released her her eyes were shining, and she was laughing a little and crying too. "You've changed your mind," she said. "You believe me now, don't you?"

"Don't talk," I said. "Don't say another word. I just want to look at you."

"It was you right from the start," she said. "Not Ned—or anyone else."

"I was a blind fool," I said.

"You never gave me a second glance."

"One glance was enough," I whispered. "But when I saw how it seemed to be between you and Ned—"

"I was never in love with him. It was just—"

"Never mind, don't say it," I said. "It's over and done with."

I stopped, remembering. Her eyes grew wide and startled, and I could see that she was remembering too.

"What happened?" I asked. "Did they catch that vicious rat?"

She brushed back her hair, the sunlight suddenly harsh on her face. "He fell into the canal. The bullets brought him down, and he collapsed on the bank."

Her hand tightened on my wrist. "Bill told me. He tried to swim, but the current carried him under. He went down and never came up."

"I'm glad," I said. "Did anyone in the camp ever see him before?"

Molly shook her head. "Bill said he was a drifter—a dangerous maniac who must have been crazed by the sun."

"I see," I said.

I reached out and drew her into my arms again, and we rested for a moment stretched out side by side on the sand.

"It's funny," I said after a while.

"What is?"

"You know what they say about the whispering. Sometimes when you listen intently you seem to hear words deep in

your mind. As if the Martians had telepathic powers.''

''Perhaps they have,'' she said.

I glanced sideways at her. ''Remember,'' I said. ''There were cities on Mars when our ancestors were hairy apes. The Martian civilization was flourishing and great fifty million years before the pyramids arose as a monument to human solidarity and worth. A bad monument, built by slave labor. But at least it was a start.''

''Now you're being poetic, Tom,'' she said.

''Perhaps I am. The Martians must have had their pyramids too. And at the pyramid stage they must have had their Larsens, to shoulder all the guilt. To them we may still be in the pyramid stage. Suppose—''

''Suppose what?''

''Suppose they wanted to warn us, to give us a lesson we couldn't forget. How can we say with certainty that a dying race couldn't still make use of certain techniques that are far beyond us.''

''I'm afraid I don't understand,'' she said, puzzled.

''Someday,'' I said, ''our own science will take a tiny fragment of human tissue from the body of a dead man, put it into an incubating machine, and a new man will arise again from that tiny shred of flesh. A man who can walk and live and breathe again, and love again, and die again after another full lifetime.

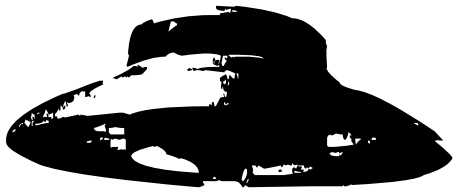
''Perhaps the Martian science was once as great as that. And the Martians might still remember a few of the techniques. Perhaps from our human brains, from our buried memories and desires, they could filch the key and bring to horrible life a thing so monstrous and so terrible—''

Her hand went suddenly cold in mine. ''Tom, you can't honestly think—''

''No,'' I said. ''It's nonsense, of course. Forget it.''

I didn't tell her what the whispering had seemed to say, deep in my mind.

We've brought you Larsen! You wanted Larsen, and we've made him for you! His flesh and his mind—his cruel strength and his wicked heart! Here he comes, here he is! Larsen, Larsen, Larsen!



THE MAN WHO HATED MARS

To escape from Mars, all Clayton had to do was the impossible. Break out of a crack-proof exile camp—get onto a ship that couldn't be boarded—smash through an impenetrable wall of steel. Perhaps he could do all these things, but he discovered that Mars did evil things to men; that he wasn't even Clayton any more. He was only—THE MAN WHO HATED MARS

''I want you to put me in prison!'' the big, hairy man said in a trembling voice.

He was addressing his request to a thin woman sitting behind a desk that seemed much too big for her. The plaque on the desk said:

LT. PHOEBE HARRIS

TERRAN REHABILITATION SERVICE

Lieutenant Harris glanced at the man before her for only a moment before she returned her eyes to the dossier on the desk; but long enough to verify the impression his voice had given. Ron Clayton was a big, ugly, cowardly, dangerous man.

He said: "Well? Dammit, say something!"

The lieutenant raised her eyes again. "Just be patient until I've read this." Her voice and eyes were expressionless, but her hand moved beneath the desk.

Clayton froze. She's yellow! he thought. She's turned on the trackers! He could see the pale greenish glow of their little eyes watching him all around the room. If he made any fast move, they would cut him down with a stun beam before he could get two feet.

She had thought he was going to jump her. Little rat! he thought, somebody ought to slap her down!

He watched her check through the heavy dossier in front of her. Finally, she looked up at him again.

"Clayton, your last conviction was for strong-arm robbery. You were given a choice between prison on Earth and freedom here on Mars. You picked Mars."

He nodded slowly. He'd been broke and hungry at the time. A sneaky little rat named Johnson had bilked Clayton out of his fair share of the Corey payroll job, and Clayton had been forced to get the money somehow. He hadn't mussed the guy up much; besides, it was the sucker's own fault. If he hadn't tried to yell—

Lieutenant Harris went on: "I'm afraid you can't back down now."

"But it isn't fair! The most I'd have got on that frame-up would've been ten years. I've been here fifteen already!"

"I'm sorry, Clayton. It can't be done. You're here. Period. Forget about trying to get back. Earth doesn't want you." Her voice sounded choppy, as though she were trying to keep it calm.

Clayton broke into a whining rage. "You can't do that! It isn't fair! I never did anything to you! I'll go talk to the Governor! He'll listen to reason! You'll see! I'll—"

"Shut up!" the woman snapped harshly. "I'm getting sick of it! I personally think you should have been locked up—permanently. I think this idea of forced colonization is going to breed trouble for Earth someday, but it is about the only way you can get anybody to colonize this frozen hunk of mud.

"Just keep it in mind that I don't like it any better than you do— and I didn't strong-arm anybody to deserve the assignment! Now get out of here!"

She moved a hand threateningly toward the manual controls of the stun beam.

Clayton retreated fast. The trackers ignored anyone walking away from the desk; they were set only to spot threatening movements toward it.

Outside the Rehabilitation Service Building, Clayton could feel the tears running down the inside of his face mask. He'd asked again and again—God only knew how many times—in the past fifteen years. Always the same answer. No.

When he'd heard that this new administrator was a woman, he'd hoped she might be easier to convince. She wasn't. If anything, she was harder than the oth-

ers.

The heat-sucking frigidity of the thin Martian air whispered around him in a feeble breeze. He shivered a little and began walking toward the recreation center.

There was a high, thin piping in the sky above him which quickly became a scream in the thin air.

He turned for a moment to watch the ship land, squinting his eyes to see the number on the hull.

Fifty-two. Space Transport Ship Fifty-two.

Probably bringing another load of poor suckers to freeze to death on Mars.

That was the thing he hated about Mars—the cold. The everlasting damned cold! And the oxidation pills; take one every three hours or smother in the poor, thin air.

The government could have put up domes; it could have put in building-to-building tunnels, at least. It could have done a hell of a lot of things to make Mars a decent place for human beings.

But no—the government had other ideas. A bunch of bigshot scientific characters had come up with the idea nearly twenty-three years before. Clayton could remember the words on the sheet he had been given when he was sentenced.

"Mankind is inherently an adaptable animal. If we are to colonize the planets of the Solar System, we must meet the conditions on those planets as best we can.

"Financially, it is impracticable to change an entire planet from its original condition to one which will support human life as it exists on Terra.

"But man, since he is adaptable, can change himself—modify his structure slightly—so that he can live on these planets with only a minimum of change in the environment."

So they made you live outside and like it. So you froze and you choked and you suffered.

Clayton hated Mars. He hated the thin air and the cold. More than anything, he hated the cold.

Ron Clayton wanted to go home.

The Recreation Building was just ahead; at least it would be warm inside. He pushed in through the outer and inner doors, and he heard the burst of music from the jukebox. His stomach tightened up into a hard cramp.

They were playing Heinlein's Green Hills of Earth.

There was almost no other sound in the room, although it was full of people. There were plenty of colonists who claimed to like Mars, but even they were silent when that song was played.

Clayton wanted to go over and smash the machine—make it stop reminding him. He clenched his teeth and his fists and his eyes and cursed mentally. God, how I hate Mars!

When the hauntingly nostalgic last chorus faded away, he walked over to the machine and fed it full of enough coins to keep it going on something else until he left.

At the bar, he ordered a beer and used it to wash down another oxidation tablet. It wasn't good beer; it didn't even deserve the name. The atmospheric pressure was so low as to boil all the carbon dioxide out of it, so the brewers

never put it back in after fermentation.

He was sorry for what he had done—really and truly sorry. If they'd only give him one more chance, he'd make good. Just one more chance. He'd work things out.

He'd promised himself that both times they'd put him up before, but things had been different then. He hadn't really been given another chance, what with parole boards and all.

Clayton closed his eyes and finished the beer. He ordered another.

He'd worked in the mines for fifteen years. It wasn't that he minded work really, but the foreman had it in for him. Always giving him a bad time; always picking out the lousy jobs for him.

Like the time he'd crawled into a sideboring in Tunnel 12 for a nap during lunch and the foreman had caught him. When he promised never to do it again if the foreman wouldn't put it on report, the guy said, "Yeah. Sure. Hate to hurt a guy's record."

Then he'd put Clayton on report anyway. Strictly a rat.

Not that Clayton ran any chance of being fired; they never fired anybody. But they'd fined him a day's pay. A whole day's pay.

He tapped his glass on the bar, and the barman came over with another beer. Clayton looked at it, then up at the barman. "Put a head on it."

The bartender looked at him sourly. "I've got some soapsuds here, Clayton, and one of these days I'm gonna put some in your beer if you keep pulling that gag."

That was the trouble with some guys. No sense of humor.

Somebody came in the door and then somebody else came in behind him, so that both inner and outer doors were open for an instant. A blast of icy breeze struck Clayton's back, and he shivered. He started to say something, then changed his mind; the doors were already closed again, and besides, one of the guys was bigger than he was.

The iciness didn't seem to go away immediately. It was like the mine. Little old Mars was cold clear down to her core—or at least down as far as they'd drilled. The walls were frozen and seemed to radiate a chill that pulled the heat right out of your blood.

Somebody was playing Green Hills again, damn them. Evidently all of his own selections had run out earlier than he'd thought they would.

Hell! There was nothing to do here. He might as well go home.

"Gimme another beer, Mac."

He'd go home as soon as he finished this one.

He stood there with his eyes closed, listening to the music and hating Mars.

A voice next to him said: "I'll have a whiskey."

The voice sounded as if the man had a bad cold, and Clayton turned slowly to look at him. After all the sterilization they went through before they left Earth, nobody on Mars ever had a cold, so there was only one thing that would make a man's voice sound like that.

Clayton was right. The fellow had an oxygen tube clamped firmly over his nose. He was wearing the uniform of the Space Transport Service.

"Just get in on the ship?" Clayton

asked conversationally.

The man nodded and grinned. "Yeah. Four hours before we take off again." He poured down the whiskey. "Sure cold out."

Clayton agreed. "It's always cold." He watched enviously as the spaceman ordered another whiskey.

Clayton couldn't afford whiskey. He probably could have by this time, if the mines had made him a foreman, like they should have.

Maybe he could talk the spaceman out of a couple of drinks.

"My name's Clayton. Ron Clayton."

The spaceman took the offered hand. "Mine's Parkinson, but everybody calls me Parks."

"Sure, Parks. Uh—can I buy you a beer?"

Parks shook his head. "No, thanks. I started on whiskey. Here, let me buy you one."

"Well—thanks. Don't mind if I do."

They drank them in silence, and Parks ordered two more.

"Been here long?" Parks asked.

"Fifteen years. Fifteen long, long years."

"Did you—uh—I mean—" Parks looked suddenly confused.

Clayton glanced quickly to make sure the bartender was out of earshot. Then he grinned. "You mean am I a convict? Nah. I came here because I wanted to. But—" He lowered his voice. "—we don't talk about it around here. You know." He gestured with one hand—a gesture that took in everyone else in the room.

Parks glanced around quickly, moving only his eyes. "Yeah. I see," he said softly.

"This your first trip?" asked Clayton.

"First one to Mars. Been on the Luna run a long time."

"Low pressure bother you much?"

"Not much. We only keep it at six pounds in the ships. Half helium and half oxygen. Only thing that bothers me is the oxy here. Or rather, the oxy that isn't here." He took a deep breath through his nose tube to emphasize his point.

Clayton clamped his teeth together, making the muscles at the side of his jaw stand out.

Parks didn't notice. "You guys have to take those pills, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"I had to take them once. Got stranded on Luna. The cat I was in broke down eighty some miles from Aristarchus Base and I had to walk back—with my oxy low. Well, I figured—"

Clayton listened to Parks' story with a great show of attention, but he had heard it before. This "lost on the moon" stuff and its variations had been going the rounds for forty years. Every once in a while, it actually did happen to someone; just often enough to keep the story going.

This guy did have a couple of new twists, but not enough to make the story worthwhile.

"Boy," Clayton said when Parks had finished, "you were lucky to come out of that alive!"

Parks nodded, well pleased with himself, and bought another round of drinks.

"Something like that happened to me

a couple of years ago," Clayton began. "I'm supervisor on the third shift in the mines at Xanthe, but at the time, I was only a foreman. One day, a couple of guys went to a branch tunnel to—"

It was a very good story. Clayton had made it up himself, so he knew that Parks had never heard it before. It was gory in just the right places, with a nice effect at the end.

"—so I had to hold up the rocks with my back while the rescue crew pulled the others out of the tunnel by crawling between my legs. Finally, they got some steel beams down there to take the load off, and I could let go. I was in the hospital for a week," he finished.

Parks was nodding vaguely. Clayton looked up at the clock above the bar and realized that they had been talking for better than an hour. Parks was buying another round.

Parks was a hell of a nice fellow.

There was, Clayton found, only one trouble with Parks. He got to talking so loud that the bartender refused to serve either one of them any more.

The bartender said Clayton was getting loud, too, but it was just because he had to talk loud to make Parks hear him.

Clayton helped Parks put his mask and parka on and they walked out into the cold night.

Parks began to sing Green Hills. About halfway through, he stopped and turned to Clayton.

"I'm from Indiana."

Clayton had already spotted him as an American by his accent.

"Indiana? That's nice. Real nice."

"Yeah. You talk about green hills, we got green hills in Indiana. What time is it?"

Clayton told him.

"Jeez-krise! Ol' spaship takes off in an hour. Ought to have one more drink first."

Clayton realized he didn't like Parks. But maybe he'd buy a bottle.

Sharkie Johnson worked in Fuels Section, and he made a nice little sideline of stealing alcohol, cutting it, and selling it. He thought it was real funny to call it Martian Gin.

Clayton said: "Let's go over to Sharkie's. Sharkie will sell us a bottle."

"Okay," said Parks. "We'll get a bottle. That's what we need: a bottle."

It was quite a walk to the Shark's place. It was so cold that even Parks was beginning to sober up a little. He was laughing like hell when Clayton started to sing.

"We're going over to the Shark's
To buy a jug of gin for Parks! Hi ho, hi ho, hi ho!"

One thing about a few drinks; you didn't get so cold. You didn't feel it too much, anyway.

The Shark still had his light on when they arrived. Clayton whispered to Parks: "I'll go in. He knows me. He wouldn't sell it if you were around. You got eight credits?"

"Sure I got eight credits. Just a minute, and I'll give you eight credits." He fished around for a minute inside his parka, and pulled out his notecase. His gloved fingers were a little clumsy, but he managed to get out a five and three ones and hand them to Clayton.

"You wait out here," Clayton said.

He went in through the outer door and

knocked on the inner one. He should have asked for ten credits. Sharkie only charged five, and that would leave him three for himself. But he could have got ten—maybe more.

When he came out with the bottle, Parks was sitting on a rock, shivering.

"Jeez-krise!" he said. "It's cold out here. Let's get to someplace where it's warm."

"Sure. I got the bottle. Want a drink?"

Parks took the bottle, opened it, and took a good belt out of it.

"Hooh!" he breathed. "Pretty smooth."

As Clayton drank, Parks said: "Hey! I better get back to the field! I know! We can go to the men's room and finish the bottle before the ship takes off! Isn't that a good idea? It's warm there."

They started back down the street toward the spacefield.

"Yep, I'm from Indiana. Southern part, down around Bloomington," Parks said. "Gimme the jug. Not Bloomington, Illinois—Bloomington, Indiana. We really got green hills down there." He drank, and handed the bottle back to Clayton. "Pers-nally, I don't see why anybody'd stay on Mars. Here y'are, practic'ly on the equator in the middle of the summer, and it's colder than hell. Brrr!

"Now if you was smart, you'd go home, where it's warm. Mars wasn't built for people to live on, anyhow. I don't see how you stand it."

That was when Clayton decided he really hated Parks.

And when Parks said: "Why be dumb, friend? Whyn't you go home?" Clayton kicked him in the stomach, hard.

"And that, that—" Clayton said as Parks doubled over.

He said it again as he kicked him in the head. And in the ribs. Parks was gasping as he writhed on the ground, but he soon lay still.

Then Clayton saw why. Parks' nose tube had come off when Clayton's foot struck his head.

Parks was breathing heavily, but he wasn't getting any oxygen.

That was when the Big Idea hit Ron Clayton. With a nosepiece on like that, you couldn't tell who a man was. He took another drink from the jug and then began to take Parks' clothes off.

The uniform fit Clayton fine, and so did the nose mask. He dumped his own clothing on top of Parks' nearly nude body, adjusted the little oxygen tank so that the gas would flow properly through the mask, took the first deep breath of good air he'd had in fifteen years, and walked toward the spacefield.

He went into the men's room at the Port Building, took a drink, and felt in the pockets of the uniform for Parks' identification. He found it and opened the booklet. It read:

PARKINSON, HERBERT J.

Steward 2nd Class, STS

Above it was a photo, and a set of fingerprints.

Clayton grinned. They'd never know it wasn't Parks getting on the ship.

Parks was a steward, too. A cook's helper. That was good. If he'd been a jetman or something like that, the crew might wonder why he wasn't on duty at takeoff. But a steward was different.

Clayton sat for several minutes, look-

ing through the booklet and drinking from the bottle. He emptied it just before the warning sirens keened through the thin air.

Clayton got up and went outside toward the ship.

"Wake up! Hey, you! Wake up!"

Somebody was slapping his cheeks. Clayton opened his eyes and looked at the blurred face over his own.

From a distance, another voice said: "Who is it?"

The blurred face said: "I don't know. He was asleep behind these cases. I think he's drunk."

Clayton wasn't drunk—he was sick. His head felt like hell. Where the devil was he?

"Get up, bud. Come on, get up!"

Clayton pulled himself up by holding to the man's arm. The effort made him dizzy and nauseated.

The other man said: "Take him down to sick bay, Casey. Get some thiamin into him."

Clayton didn't struggle as they led him down to the sick bay. He was trying to clear his head. Where was he? He must have been pretty drunk last night.

He remembered meeting Parks. And getting thrown out by the bartender. Then what?

Oh, yeah. He'd gone to the Shark's for a bottle. From there on, it was mostly gone. He remembered a fight or something, but that was all that registered.

The medic in the sick bay fired two shots from a hypo-gun into both arms, but Clayton ignored the slight sting.

"Where am I?"

"Real original. Here, take these." He handed Clayton a couple of capsules, and gave him a glass of water to wash them down with.

When the water hit his stomach, there was an immediate reaction.

"Oh, Christ!" the medic said. "Get a mop, somebody. Here, bud; heave into this." He put a basin on the table in front of Clayton.

It took them the better part of an hour to get Clayton awake enough to realize what was going on and where he was. Even then, he was plenty groggy.

It was the First Officer of the STS-52 who finally got the story straight. As soon as Clayton was in condition, the medic and the quartermaster officer who had found him took him up to the First Officer's compartment.

"I was checking through the stores this morning when I found this man. He was asleep, dead drunk, behind the crates."

"He was drunk, all right," supplied the medic. "I found this in his pocket." He flipped a booklet to the First Officer.

The First was a young man, not older than twenty-eight with tough-looking gray eyes. He looked over the booklet.

"Where did you get Parkinson's ID booklet? And his uniform?"

Clayton looked down at his clothes in wonder. "I don't know."

"You don't know? That's a hell of an answer."

"Well, I was drunk," Clayton said defensively. "A man doesn't know what he's doing when he's drunk." He frowned in concentration. He knew he'd have to think up some story.

"I kind of remember we made a bet. I bet him I could get on the ship. Sure—I remember, now. That's what happened; I bet him I could get on the ship and we traded clothes."

"Where is he now?"

"At my place, sleeping it off, I guess."

"Without his oxy-mask?"

"Oh, I gave him my oxidation pills for the mask."

The First shook his head. "That sounds like the kind of trick Parkinson would pull, all right. I'll have to write it up and turn you both in to the authorities when we hit Earth." He eyed Clayton. "What's your name?"

"Cartwright. Sam Cartwright," Clayton said without batting an eye.

"Volunteer or convicted colonist?"

"Volunteer."

The First looked at him for a long moment, disbelief in his eyes.

It didn't matter. Volunteer or convict, there was no place Clayton could go. From the officer's viewpoint, he was as safely imprisoned in the spaceship as he would be on Mars or a prison on Earth.

The First wrote in the log book, and then said: "Well, we're one man short in the kitchen. You wanted to take Parkinson's place; brother, you've got it—without pay." He paused for a moment.

"You know, of course," he said judiciously, "that you'll be shipped back to Mars immediately. And you'll have to work out your passage both ways—it will be deducted from your pay."

Clayton nodded. "I know."

"I don't know what else will happen. If there's a conviction, you may lose your volunteer status on Mars. And there may be fines taken out of your pay, too.

"Well, that's all, Cartwright. You can report to Kissman in the kitchen."

The First pressed a button on his desk and spoke into the intercom. "Who was on duty at the airlock when the crew came aboard last night? Send him up. I want to talk to him."

Then the quartermaster officer led Clayton out the door and took him to the kitchen.

The ship's driver tubes were pushing it along at a steady five hundred centimeters per second squared acceleration, pushing her steadily closer to Earth with a little more than half a gravity of drive.

There wasn't much for Clayton to do, really. He helped to select the foods that went into the automatics, and he cleaned them out after each meal was cooked. Once every day, he had to partially dismantle them for a really thorough going-over.

And all the time, he was thinking.

Parkinson must be dead; he knew that. That meant the Chamber. And even if he wasn't, they'd send Clayton back to Mars. Luckily, there was no way for either planet to communicate with the ship; it was hard enough to keep a beam trained on a planet without trying to hit such a comparatively small thing as a ship.

But they would know about it on Earth by now. They would pick him up the instant the ship landed. And the best he could hope for was a return to Mars.

No, by God! He wouldn't go back to that frozen mud-ball! He'd stay on Earth,

where it was warm and comfortable and a man could live where he was meant to live. Where there was plenty of air to breathe and plenty of water to drink. Where the beer tasted like beer and not like slop. Earth. Good green hills, the like of which exists nowhere else.

Slowly, over the days, he evolved a plan. He watched and waited and checked each little detail to make sure nothing would go wrong. It couldn't go wrong. He didn't want to die, and he didn't want to go back to Mars.

Nobody on the ship liked him; they couldn't appreciate his position. He hadn't done anything to them, but they just didn't like him. He didn't know why; he'd tried to get along with them. Well, if they didn't like him, the hell with them.

If things worked out the way he figured, they'd be damned sorry.

He was very clever about the whole plan. When turn-over came, he pretended to get violently spacesick. That gave him an opportunity to steal a bottle of chloral hydrate from the medic's locker.

And, while he worked in the kitchen, he spent a great deal of time sharpening a big carving knife.

Once, during his off time, he managed to disable one of the ship's two lifeboats. He was saving the other for himself.

The ship was eight hours out from Earth and still decelerating when Clayton pulled his getaway.

It was surprisingly easy. He was supposed to be asleep when he sneaked down to the drive compartment with the knife. He pushed open the door, looked in, and grinned like an ape.

The Engineer and the two jetmen were out cold from the chloral hydrate in the coffee from the kitchen.

Moving rapidly, he went to the spares locker and began methodically to smash every replacement part for the drivers. Then he took three of the signal bombs from the emergency kit, set them for five minutes, and placed them around the driver circuits.

He looked at the three sleeping men. What if they woke up before the bombs went off? He didn't want to kill them though. He wanted them to know what had happened and who had done it.

He grinned. There was a way. He simply had to drag them outside and jam the door lock. He took the key from the Engineer, inserted it, turned it, and snapped off the head, leaving the body of the key still in the lock. Nobody would unjam it in the next four minutes.

Then he began to run up the stairwell toward the good lifeboat.

He was panting and out of breath when he arrived, but no one had stopped him. No one had even seen him.

He clambered into the lifeboat, made everything ready, and waited.

The signal bombs were not heavy charges; their main purposes was to make a flare bright enough to be seen for thousands of miles in space. Fluorine and magnesium made plenty of light—and heat.

Quite suddenly, there was no gravity. He had felt nothing, but he knew that the bombs had exploded. He punched the LAUNCH switch on the control board of the lifeboat, and the little ship leaped

out from the side of the greater one.

Then he turned on the drive, set it at half a gee, and watched the STS-52 drop behind him. It was no longer decelerating, so it would miss Earth and drift on into space. On the other hand, the lifeship would come down very neatly within a few hundred miles of the spaceport in Utah, the destination of the STS-52.

Landing the lifeship would be the only difficult part of the maneuver, but they were designed to be handled by beginners. Full instructions were printed on the simplified control board.

Clayton studied them for a while, then set the alarm to waken him in seven hours and dozed off to sleep.

He dreamed of Indiana. It was full of nice, green hills and leafy woods, and Parkinson was inviting him over to his mother's house for chicken and whiskey. And all for free.

Beneath the dream was the calm assurance that they would never catch him and send him back. When the STS-52 failed to show up, they would think he had been lost with it. They would never look for him.

When the alarm rang, Earth was a mottled globe looming hugely beneath the ship. Clayton watched the dials on the board, and began to follow the instructions on the landing sheet.

He wasn't too good at it. The accelerometer climbed higher and higher, and he felt as though he could hardly move his hands to the proper switches.

He was less than fifteen feet off the ground when his hand slipped. The ship, out of control, shifted, spun, and toppled over on its side, smashing a great hole in the cabin.

Clayton shook his head and tried to stand up in the wreckage. He got to his hands and knees, dizzy but unhurt, and took a deep breath of the fresh air that was blowing in through the hole in the cabin.

It felt just like home.

Bureau of Criminal Investigation

Regional Headquarters

Cheyenne, Wyoming

20 January 2102

To: Space Transport Service Subject: Lifeship 2, STS-52 Attention Mr. P. D. Latimer

Dear Paul,

I have on hand the copies of your reports on the rescue of the men on the disabled STS-52. It is fortunate that the Lunar radar stations could compute their orbit.

The detailed official report will follow, but briefly, this is what happened:

The lifeship landed—or, rather, crashed—several miles west of Cheyenne, as you know, but it was impossible to find the man who was piloting it until yesterday because of the weather.

He has been identified as Ronald Watkins Clayton, exiled to Mars fifteen years ago.

Evidently, he didn't realize that fifteen years of Martian gravity had so weakened his muscles that he could hardly walk under the pull of a full Earth gee.

As it was, he could only crawl about a hundred yards from the wrecked lifeship before he collapsed.

Well, I hope this clears up everything.

I hope you're not getting the snow storms up there like we've been getting them.

John B. Remley
Captain, CBI

THE MERCENARIES

Once, wars were won by maneuvering hired fighting men; now wars are different—and the hired experts are different. But the human problems remain!

Duncan MacLeod hung up the suit he had taken off, and sealed his shirt, socks and underwear in a laundry envelope bearing his name and identity-number, tossing this into one of the wire baskets provided for the purpose. Then, naked except for the plastic identity disk around his neck, he went over to the desk, turned in his locker key, and passed into the big room beyond.

Four or five young men, probably soldiers on their way to town, were coming through from the other side. Like MacLeod, they wore only the plastic disks they had received in exchange for the metal ones they wore inside the reservation, and they were being searched by attendants who combed through their hair, probed into ears and nostrils, peered into mouths with tiny searchlights, and employed a variety of magnetic and electronic detectors.

To this search MacLeod submitted wearily. He had become quite a connoisseur of security measures in fifteen years' research and development work for a dozen different nations, but the Tonto Basin Research Establishment of the Philadelphia Project exceeded anything he had seen before. There were gray-haired veterans of the old Manhattan Project here, men who had worked with Fermi at Chicago, or with Oppenheimer at Los Alamos, twenty years before, and they swore in amused exasperation when they thought of how the relatively mild regulations of those days had irked them. And yet, the very existence of the Manhattan Project had been kept a secret from all but those engaged in it, and its purpose from most of them. Today, in 1965, there might have been a few wandering tribesmen in Somaliland or the Kirghiz Steppes who had never heard of the Western Union's Philadelphia Project, or of the Fourth Komintern's Red Triumph Five-Year Plan, or of the Islamic Kaliphate's Al-Borak Undertaking, or of the Ibero-American Confederation's Cavor Project, but every literate person in the world knew that the four great power-blocs were racing desperately to launch the first spaceship to reach the Moon and build the Lunar fortress that would insure world supremacy.

He turned in the nonmagnetic identity disk at the desk on the other side of the search room, receiving the metal one he wore inside the reservation, and with it the key to his inside locker. He put on the clothes he had left behind when he had passed out, and filled his pockets with the miscellany of small articles he had not been allowed to carry off the reservation. He knotted the garish necktie

affected by the civilian workers and in particular by members of the MacLeod Research Team to advertise their nonmilitary status, lit his pipe, and walked out into the open gallery beyond.

Karen Hilquist was waiting for him there, reclining in one of the metal chairs. She looked cool in the belted white coveralls, with the white turban bound around her yellow hair, and very beautiful, and when he saw her, his heart gave a little bump, like a geiger responding to an ionizing particle. It always did that, although they had been together for twelve years, and married for ten. Then she saw him and smiled, and he came over, fanning himself with his sun helmet, and dropped into a chair beside her.

"Did you call our center for a jeep?" he asked. When she nodded, he continued: "I thought you would, so I didn't bother."

For a while, they sat silent, looking with bored distaste at the swarm of steel-helmeted Army riflemen and tommy-gunners guarding the transfer platforms and the vehicles gate. A string of trucks had been passed under heavy guard into the clearance compound: they were now unloading supplies onto a platform, at the other side of which other trucks were backed waiting to receive the shipment. A hundred feet of bare concrete and fifty armed soldiers separated these from the men and trucks from the outside, preventing contact.

"And still they can't stop leaks," Karen said softly. "And we get blamed for it."

MacLeod nodded and started to say something, when his attention was drawn by a commotion on the driveway. A big Tucker limousine with an O.D. paint job and the single-starred flag of a brigadier general was approaching, horning impatiently. In the back seat MacLeod could see a heavy-shouldered figure with the face of a bad-tempered great Dane—General Daniel Nayland, the military commander of Tonto Basin. The inside guards jumped to attention and saluted; the barrier shot up as though rocket-propelled, and the car slid through; the barrier slammed down behind it. On the other side, the guards were hurling themselves into a frenzy of saluting. Karen made a face after the receding car and muttered something in Hindustani. She probably didn't know the literal meaning of what she had called General Nayland, but she understood that it was a term of extreme opprobrium.

Her husband contributed: "His idea of Heaven would be a huge research establishment, where he'd be a five-star general, and Galileo, Newton, Priestley, Dalton, Maxwell, Planck and Einstein would be tech sergeants."

"And Marie Curie and Lise Meitner would be Wac corporals," Karen added. "He really hates all of us, doesn't he?"

"He hates our Team," MacLeod replied. "In the first place, we're a lot of civilians, who aren't subject to his regulations and don't have to salute him. We're working under contract with the Western Union, not with the United States Government, and as the United States participates in the Western Union on a treaty basis, our contract has the force of a treaty obligation. It gives us what amounts to extraterritoriality, like Europeans in China during the Nineteenth Century. So we have our own transport, for which he must

furnish petrol, and our own armed guard, and we fly our own flag over Team Center, and that gripes him as much as anything else. That and the fact that we're foreigners. So wouldn't he love to make this espionage rap stick on us!"

"And our contract specifically gives the United States the right to take action against us in case we endanger the national security," Karen added. She stuffed her cigarette into the not-too-recently-emptied receiver beside her chair, her blue eyes troubled. "You know, some of us could get shot over this, if we're not careful. Dunc, does it really have to be one of our own people who—?"

"I don't see how it could be anybody else," MacLeod said. "I don't like the idea any more than you do, but there it is."

"Well, what are we going to do? Is there nobody whom we can trust?"

"Among the technicians and guards, yes. I could think of a score who are absolutely loyal. But among the Team itself—the top researchers—there's nobody I'd take a chance on but Kato Sugihara."

"Can you even be sure of him? I'd hate to think of him as a traitor, but—"

"I have a couple of reasons for eliminating Kato," MacLeod said. "In the first place, outside nucleonic and binding-force physics, there are only three things he's interested in. Jitterbugging, hand-painted neckties, and Southern-style cooking. If he went over to the Komintern, he wouldn't be able to get any of those. Then, he only spends about half his share of the Team's profits, and turns the rest back into the Team Fund. He has a credit of about a hundred thousand dollars, which he'd lose by leaving us. And then, there's another thing. Kato's father was killed on Guadalcanal, in 1942, when he was only five. After that he was brought up in the teachings of Bushido by his grandfather, an old-time samurai. Bushido is open to some criticism, but nobody can show where double-crossing your own gang is good Bushido. And today, Japan is allied with the Western Union, and in any case, he wouldn't help the Komintern. The Japs'll forgive Russia for that Mussolini back-stab in 1945 after the Irish start building monuments to Cromwell."

A light-blue jeep, lettered ***MacLeod Research Team*** in cherry-red, was approaching across the wide concrete apron. MacLeod grinned.

"Here it comes. Fasten your safety belt when you get in; that's Ahmed driving."

Karen looked at her watch. "And it's almost time for dinner. You know, I dread the thought of sitting at the table with the others, and wondering which of them is betraying us."

"Only nine of us, instead of thirteen, and still one is a Judas," MacLeod said. "I suppose there's always a place for Judas, at any table."

The MacLeod Team dined together, apart from their assistants and technicians and students. This was no snobbish attempt at class-distinction: matters of Team policy were often discussed at the big round table, and the more confidential details of their work. People who have only their knowledge and their ideas to sell are wary about bandying either loosely, and the six men and three women who faced each other across the twelve-foot diameter of the teakwood table had

no other stock-in-trade.

They were nine people of nine different nationalities, or they were nine people of the common extra-nationality of science. That Duncan MacLeod, their leader, had grown up in the Transvaal and his wife had been born in the Swedish university town of Upsala was typical not only of their own group but of the hundreds of independent research-teams that had sprung up after the Second World War. The scientist-adventurer may have been born of the relentless struggle for scientific armament supremacy among nations and the competition for improved techniques among industrial corporations during the late 1950s and early '60s, but he had been begotten when two masses of uranium came together at the top of a steel tower in New Mexico in 1945. And, because scientific research is pre-eminently a matter of pooling brains and efforts, the independent scientists had banded together into teams whose leaders acquired power greater than that of any *condottiere* captain of Renaissance Italy.

Duncan MacLeod, sitting outwardly relaxed and merry and secretly watchful and bitterly sad, was such a free-captain of science. One by one, the others had rallied around him, not because he was a greater physicist than they, but because he was a bolder, more clever, less scrupulous adventurer, better able to guide them through the maze of international power-politics and the no less ruthless if less nakedly violent world of Big Industry.

There was his wife, Karen Hilquist, the young metallurgist who, before she was twenty-five, had perfected a new hardening process for SKF and an incredibly tough gun-steel for the Bofors works. In the few minutes since they had returned to Team Center, she had managed to change her coveralls for a skirt and blouse, and do something intriguing with her hair.

And there was Kato Sugihara, looking younger than his twenty-eight years, who had begun to demonstrate the existence of whole orders of structure below the level of nuclear particles.

There was Suzanne Maillard, her gray hair upswept from a face that had never been beautiful but which was alive with something rarer than mere beauty: she possessed, at the brink of fifty, a charm and smartness that many women half her age might have envied, and she knew more about cosmic rays than any other person living.

And Adam Lowiewski, his black mustache contrasting so oddly with his silver hair, frantically scribbling equations on his doodling-pad, as though his racing fingers could never keep pace with his brain, and explaining them, with obvious condescension, to the boyish-looking Japanese beside him. He was one of the greatest of living mathematicians by anybody's reckoning—*the* greatest, by his own.

And Sir Neville Lawton, the electronics expert, with thinning red-gray hair and meticulously-clipped mustache, who always gave the impression of being in evening clothes, even when, as now, he was dressed in faded khaki.

And Heym ben-Hillel, the Israeli quantum and wave-mechanics man, his heaping dinner plate an affront to the Laws of Moses, his white hair a fluffy,

tangled chaos, laughing at an impassively-delivered joke the English knight had made.

And Rudolf von Heldenfeld, with a thin-lipped killer's mouth and a frozen face that never betrayed its owner's thoughts—he was the specialist in magnetic currents and electromagnetic fields.

And Farida Khouroglu, the Turkish girl whom MacLeod and Karen had found begging in the streets of Istanbul, ten years ago, and who had grown up following the fortunes of the MacLeod Team on every continent and in a score of nations. It was doubtful if she had ever had a day's formal schooling in her life, but now she was secretary of the Team, with a grasp of physics that would have shamed many a professor. She had grown up a beauty, too, with the large dark eyes and jet-black hair and paper-white skin of her race. She and Kato Sugihara were very much in love.

A good team; the best physics-research team in a power-mad, knowledge-hungry world. MacLeod thought, toying with the stem of his wineglass, of some of their triumphs: The West Australia Atomic Power Plant. The Segovia Plutonium Works, which had got them all titled as Grandees of the restored Spanish Monarchy. The sea-water chemical extraction plant in Puerto Rico, where they had worked for Associated Enterprises, whose president, Blake Hartley, had later become President of the United States. The hard-won victory over a seemingly insoluble problem in the Belgian Congo uranium mines——He thought, too, of the dangers they had faced together, in a world where soldiers must use the weapons of science and scientists must learn the arts of violence. Of the treachery of the Islamic Kaliphate, for whom they had once worked; of the intrigues and plots which had surrounded them in Spain; of the many attempted kidnappings and assassinations; of the time in Basra when they had fought with pistols and tommy guns and snatched-up clubs and flasks of acid to defend their laboratories.

A good team—before the rot of treason had touched it. He could almost smell the putrid stench of it, and yet, as he glanced from face to face, he could not guess the traitor. And he had so little time—

Kato Sugihara's voice rose to dominate the murmur of conversation around the table.

"I think I am getting somewhere on my photon-neutrino-electron interchange-cycle," he announced. "And I think it can be correlated to the collapsed-matter research."

"So?" von Heldenfeld looked up in interest. "And not with the problem of what goes on in the 'hot layer' surrounding the Earth?"

"No, Suzanne talked me out of that idea," the Japanese replied. "That's just a secondary effect of the effect of cosmic rays and solar radiations on the order of particles existing at that level. But I think that I have the key to the problem of collapsing matter to plate the hull of the spaceship."

"That's interesting," Sir Neville Lawton commented. "How so?"

"Well, you know what happens when a photon comes in contact with the atomic structure of matter," Kato said. "There

may be an elastic collision, in which the photon merely bounces off. Macroscopically, that's the effect we call reflection of light. Or there may be an inelastic collision, when the photon hits an atom and knocks out an electron—the old photoelectric effect. Or, the photon may be retained for a while and emitted again relatively unchanged—the effect observed in luminous paint. Or, the photon may penetrate, undergo a change to a neutrino, and either remain in the nucleus of the atom or pass through it, depending upon a number of factors. All this, of course, is old stuff; even the photon-neutrino interchange has been known since the mid-'50s, when the Gamow neutrino-counter was developed. But now we come to what you have been so good as to christen the Sugihara Effect—the neutrino picking up a negative charge and, in effect, turning into an electron, and then losing its charge, turning back into a neutrino, and then, as in the case of metal heated to incandescence, being emitted again as a photon.

"At first, we thought this had no connection with the spaceship insulation problem we are under contract to work out, and we agreed to keep this effect a Team secret until we could find out if it had commercial possibilities. But now, I find that it has a direct connection with the collapsed-matter problem. When the electron loses its negative charge and reverts to a neutrino, there is a definite accretion of interatomic binding-force, and the molecule, or the crystalline lattice or whatever tends to contract, and when the neutrino becomes a photon, the nucleus of the atom contracts."

Heym ben-Hillel was sitting oblivious to everything but his young colleague's words, a slice of the flesh of the unclean beast impaled on his fork and halfway to his mouth.

"Yes! Certainly!" he exclaimed. "That would explain so many things I have wondered about: And of course, there are other forces at work which, in the course of nature, balance that effect—"

"But can the process be controlled?" Suzanne Maillard wanted to know. "Can you convert electrons to neutrinos and then to photons in sufficient numbers, and eliminate other effects that would cause compensating atomic and molecular expansion?"

Kato grinned, like a tomcat contemplating the bones of a fish he has just eaten.

"Yes, I can. I have." He turned to MacLeod. "Remember those bullets I got from you?" he asked.

MacLeod nodded. He handloaded for his .38-special, and like all advanced cases of handloading-fever, he was religiously fanatical about uniformity of bullet weights and dimensions. Unlike most handloaders, he had available the instruments to secure such uniformity.

"Those bullets are as nearly alike as different objects can be," Kato said. "They weigh 158 grains, and that means one-five-eight-point-zero-zero-zero-practically-nothing. The diameter is .35903 inches. All right; I've been subjecting those bullets to different radiation-bombardments, and the best results have given me a bullet with a diameter of .35892 inches, and the weight is unchanged. In other words, there's been no loss of mass, but the mass had contracted. And that's only been the first test."

"Well, write up everything you have on it, and we'll lay out further experimental work," MacLeod said. He glanced around the table. "So far, we can't be entirely sure. The shrinkage may be all in the crystalline lattice: the atomic structure may be unchanged. What we need is matter that is really collapsed."

"I'll do that," Kato said. "Barida, I'll have all my data available for you before noon tomorrow: you can make up copies for all Team members."

"Make mine on microfilm, for projection," von Heldenfeld said.

"Mine, too," Sir Neville Lawton added.

"Better make microfilm copies for everybody," Heym ben-Hillel suggested. "They're handier than type-script."

MacLeod rose silently and tiptoed around behind his wife and Rudolf von Heldenfeld, to touch Kato Sugihara on the shoulder.

"Come on outside, Kato," he whispered. "I want to talk to you."

The Japanese nodded and rose, following him outside onto the roof above the laboratories. They walked over to the edge and stopped at the balustrade.

"Kato, when you write up your stuff, I want you to falsify everything you can. Put it in such form that the data will be absolutely worthless, but also in such form that nobody, not even Team members, will know it has been falsified. Can you do that?"

Kato's almond-shaped eyes widened. "Of course I can, Dunc," he replied. "But why—?"

"I hate to say this, but we have a traitor in the Team. One of those people back in the dining room is selling us out to the Fourth Komintern. I know it's not Karen, and I know it's not you, and that's as much as I do know, now."

The Japanese sucked in his breath in a sharp hiss. "You wouldn't say that unless you were sure, Dunc," he said.

"No. At about 1000 this morning, Dr. Weissberg, the civilian director, called me to his office. I found him very much upset. He told me that General Nayland is accusing us—by which he meant this Team—of furnishing secret information on our subproject to Komintern agents. He said that British Intelligence agents at Smolensk had learned that the Red Triumph laboratories there were working along lines of research originated at MacLeod Team Center here. They relayed the information to Western Union Central Intelligence, and WU passed it on to United States Central Intelligence, and now Counter Espionage is riding Nayland about it, and he's trying to make us the goat."

"He would love to get some of us shot," Kato said. "And that could happen. They took a long time getting tough about espionage in this country, but when Americans get tough about something, they get tough right. But look here; we handed in our progress-reports to Felix Weissberg, and he passed them on to Nayland. Couldn't the leak be right in Nayland's own HQ?"

"That's what I thought, at first," MacLeod replied. "Just wishful thinking, though. Fact is, I went up to Nayland's HQ and had it out with him; accused him of just that. I think I threw enough of a scare into him to hold him for a couple of days. I wanted to know just what it was the

Komintern was supposed to have got from us, but he wouldn't tell me. That, of course, was classified-stuff."

"Well?"

"Well then, Karen and I got our digestive tracts emptied and went in to town, where I could use a phone that didn't go through a military switch-board, and I put through a call to Allan Hartley, President Hartley's son. He owes us a break, after the work we did in Puerto Rico. I told him all I wanted was some information to help clear ourselves, and he told me to wait a half an hour and then call Counter Espionage Office in Washington and talk to General Hammond."

"Ha! If Allan Hartley's for us, what are we worried about?" Kato asked. "I always knew he was the power back of Associated Enterprises and his father was the front-man: I'll bet it's the same with the Government."

"Allan Hartley's for us as long as our nose is clean. If we let it get dirty, we get it bloodied, too. We have to clean it ourselves," MacLeod told him. "But here's what Hammond gave me: The Komintern knows all about our collapsed-matter experiments with zinc, titanium and nickel. They know about our theoretical work on cosmic rays, including Suzanne's work up to about a month ago. They know about that effect Sir Neville and Heym discovered two months ago." He paused. "And they know about the photon-neutrino-electron interchange."

Kato responded to this with a gruesome double-take that gave his face the fleeting appearance of an ancient samurai war mask.

"That wasn't included in any report we ever made," he said. "You're right: the leak comes from inside the Team. It must be Sir Neville, or Suzanne, or Heym ben-Hillel, or Adam Lowiewski, or Rudolf von Heldenfeld, or—No! No, I can't believe it could be Farida!" He looked at MacLeod pleadingly. "You don't think she could have—?"

"No, Kato. The Team's her whole life, even more than it is mine. She came with us when she was only twelve, and grew up with us. She doesn't know any other life than this, and wouldn't want any other. It has to be one of the other five."

"Well, there's Suzanne," Kato began. "She had to clear out of France because of political activities, after the collapse of the Fourth Republic and the establishment of the Rightist Directoire in '57. And she worked with Joliot-Curie, and she was at the University of Louvain in the early '50s, when that place was crawling with Commies."

"And that brings us to Sir Neville," MacLeod added. "He dabbles in spiritualism; he and Suzanne do planchette-seances. A planchette can be manipulated. Maybe Suzanne produced a communication advising Sir Neville to help the Komintern."

"Could be. Then, how about Lowiewski? He's a Pole who can't go back to Poland, and Poland's a Komintern country." Kato pointed out. "Maybe he'd sell us out for amnesty, though why he'd want to go back there, the way things are now—?"

"His vanity. You know, missionary-school native going back to the village wearing real pants, to show off to the savages. Used to be a standing joke, down where I came from." MacLeod thought for a moment. "And Rudolf: he's always had

a poor view of the democratic system of government. He might feel more at home with the Komintern. Of course, the Ruskis killed his parents in 1945—"

"So what?" Kato retorted. "The Americans killed my father in 1942, but I'm not making an issue out of it. That was another war; Japan's a Western Union country, now. So's Germany——How about Heym, by the way? Remember when the Komintern wanted us to come to Russia and do the same work we're doing here?"

"I remember that after we turned them down, somebody tried to kidnap Karen," MacLeod said grimly. "I remember a couple of Russians got rather suddenly dead trying it, too."

"I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking of our round-table argument when the proposition was considered. Heym was in favor of accepting. Now that, I would say, indicates either Communist sympathies or an overtrusting nature," Kato submitted. "And a lot of grade-A traitors have been made out of people with trusting natures."

MacLeod got out his pipe and lit it. For a long time, he stared out across the mountain-ringed vista of sagebrush, dotted at wide intervals with the bulks of research-centers and the red roofs of the villages.

"Kato, I think I know how we're going to find out which one it is," he said. "First of all, you write up your data, and falsify it so that it won't do any damage if it gets into Komintern hands. And then..."

The next day started in an atmosphere of suppressed excitement and anxiety, which, beginning with MacLeod and Karen and Kato Sugihara, seemed to communicate itself by contagion to everybody in the MacLeod Team's laboratories. The top researchers and their immediate assistants and students were the first to catch it; they ascribed the tension under which their leader and his wife and the Japanese labored to the recent developments in the collapsed-matter problem. Then, there were about a dozen implicitly-trusted technicians and guards, who had been secretly gathered in MacLeod's office the night before and informed of the crisis that had arisen. Their associates could not miss the fact that they were preoccupied with something unusual.

They were a variegated crew; men who had been added to the Team in every corner of the world. There was Ahmed Abd-el-Rahman, the Arab jeep-driver who had joined them in Basra. There was the wiry little Greek whom everybody called Alex Unpronounceable. There was an Italian, and two Chinese, and a cashiered French Air Force officer, and a Malay, and the son of an English earl who insisted that his name was Bertie Wooster. They had sworn themselves to secrecy, had heard MacLeod's story with a polylingual burst of pious or blasphemous exclamations, and then they had scattered, each to the work assigned him.

MacLeod had risen early and submitted to the ordeal of the search to leave the reservation and go to town again, this time for a conference at the shabby back-street cigar store that concealed a Counter Espionage center. He had returned just as Farida Khouroglu was finishing the microfilm copies of Kato's ingeniously-concocted pseudo-data.

These copies were distributed at noon, while the Team was lunching, along with carbons of the original type-script.

He was the first to leave the table, going directly to the basement, where Alex Unpronounceable and the man who had got his alias from the works of P. G. Wodehouse were listening in on the telephone calls going in and out through the Team-center switch-board, and making recordings. For two hours, MacLeod remained with them. He heard Suzanne Maillard and some woman who was talking from a number in the Army married-officers' settlement making arrangements about a party. He heard Rudolf von Heldenfeld make a date with some girl. He listened to a violent altercation between the Team chef and somebody at Army Quartermaster's HQ about the quality of a lot of dressed chicken. He listened to a call that came in for Adam Lowiewski, the mathematician.

"This is Joe," the caller said. "I've got to go to town late this afternoon, but I was wondering if you'd have time to meet me at the Recreation House at Oppenheimer Village for a game of chess. I'm calling from there, now."

"Fine; I can make it," Lowiewski's voice replied. "I'm in the middle of a devil's own mathematical problem; maybe a game of chess would clear my head. I have a new queen's-knight gambit I want to try on you, anyhow."

Bertie Wooster looked up sharply. "Now there; that may be what we're—"

The telephone beside MacLeod rang. He scooped it up; named himself into it.

It was Ahmed Abd-el-Rahman. "Look, chief; I tail this guy to Oppenheimer Village," the Arab, who had learned English from American movies, answered. "He goes into the rec-joint. I slide in after him, an' he ain't in sight. I'm lookin' around for him, see, when he comes bargin' outa the Don Ameche box. Then he grabs a table an' a beer. What next?"

"Stay there; keep an eye on him," MacLeod told him. "If I want you, I'll call."

MacLeod hung up and straightened, feeling under his packet for his .38-special.

"That's it, boys," he said. "Lowiewski. Come on."

"Hah!" Alex Unpronounceable had his gun out and was checking the cylinder. He spoke briefly in description of the Polish mathematician's ancestry, physical characteristics, and probable post-mortem destination. Then he put the gun away, and the three men left the basement.

For minutes that seamed like hours, MacLeod and the Greek waited on the main floor, where they could watch both the elevators and the stairway. Bertie Wooster had gone up to alert Kato Sugihara and Karen. Then the door of one of the elevators opened and Adam Lowiewski emerged, with Kato behind him, apparently lost in a bulky scientific journal he was reading. The Greek moved in from one side, and MacLeod stepped in front of the Pole.

"Hi, Adam," he greeted. "Have you looked into that batch of data yet?"

"Oh, yes. Yes." Lowiewski seemed barely able to keep his impatience within the bounds of politeness. "Of course, it's out of my line, but the mathematics seems sound." He started to move away.

"You're not going anywhere,"

MacLeod told him. "The chess game is over. The red pawns are taken—the one at Oppenheimer Village, and the one here."

There was a split second in which Lowiewski struggled—almost successfully—to erase the consternation from his face.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he began. His right hand started to slide under his left coat lapel.

MacLeod's Colt was covering him before he could complete the movement. At the same time, Kato Sugihara dropped the paper-bound periodical, revealing the thin-bladed knife he had concealed under it. He stepped forward, pressing the point of the weapon against the Pole's side. With the other hand, he reached across Lowiewski's chest and jerked the pistol from his shoulder-holster. It was one of the elegant little .32 Beretta 1954 Model automatics.

"Into the elevator," MacLeod ordered. An increasing pressure of Kato's knife emphasized the order. "And watch him; don't let him get rid of anything," he added to the Greek.

"If you would explain this outrage—" Lowiewski began. "I assume it is your idea of a joke—"

Without even replying, MacLeod slammed the doors and started the elevator upward, letting it rise six floors to the living quarters. Karen Hilquist and the aristocratic black-sheep who called himself Bertie Wooster were waiting when he opened the door. The Englishman took one of Lowiewski's arms; MacLeod took the other. The rest fell in behind as they hustled the captive down the hall and into the big sound-proofed dining room. They kept Lowiewski standing, well away from any movable object in the room; Alex Unpronounceable took his left arm as MacLeod released it and went to the communicator and punched the all-outlets button.

"Dr. Maillard; Dr. Sir Neville Lawton; Dr. ben-Hillel; Dr. von Heldenfeld; Mlle. Khouroglu," he called. "Dr. MacLeod speaking. Come at once, repeat at once, to the round table—Dr. Maillard; Dr. Sir Neville Lawton—"

Karen said something to the Japanese and went outside. For a while, nobody spoke. Kato came over and lit a cigarette in the bowl of MacLeod's pipe. Then the other Team members entered in a body. Evidently Karen had intercepted them in the hallway and warned them that they would find some unusual situation inside; even so, there was a burst of surprised exclamations when they found Adam Lowiewski under detention.

"Ladies and gentlemen," MacLeod said, "I regret to tell you that I have placed our colleague, Dr. Lowiewski, under arrest. He is suspected of betraying confidential data to agents of the Fourth Komintern. Yesterday, I learned that data on all our work here, including Team-secret data on the Sugihara Effect, had got into the hands of the Komintern and was being used in research at the Smolensk laboratories. I also learned that General Nayland blames this Team as a whole with double-dealing and selling this data to the Komintern. I don't need to go into any lengthy exposition of General Nayland's attitude toward this Team, or toward Free Scientists as a class, or toward the research-contract system. Nor do I need to point out that if he pressed

these charges against us, some of us could easily suffer death or imprisonment."

"So he had to have a victim in a hurry, and pulled my name out of the hat," Lowiewski sneered.

"I appreciate the gravity of the situation," Sir Neville Lawton said. "And if the Sugihara Effect was among the data betrayed, I can understand that nobody but one of us could have betrayed it. But why, necessarily, should it be Adam? We all have unlimited access to all records and theoretical data."

"Exactly. But collecting information is the smallest and easiest part of espionage. Almost anybody can collect information. Where the spy really earns his pay is in transmitting of information. Now, think of the almost fantastic security measures in force here, and consider how you would get such information, including masses of mathematical data beyond any human power of memorization, out of this reservation."

"Ha, nobody can take anything out," Suzanne Maillard said. "Not even one's breakfast. Is Adam accused of sorcery, too?"

"The only material things that are allowed to leave this reservation are sealed cases of models and data shipped to the different development plants. And the Sugihara Effect never was reported, and wouldn't go out that way," Heym ben-Hillel objected.

"But the data on the Sugihara Effect reached Smolensk," MacLeod replied. "And don't talk about Darwin and Wallace: it wasn't a coincidence. This stuff was taken out of the Tonto Basin Reservation by the only person who could have done so, in the only way that anything could leave the reservation without search. So I had that person shadowed, and at the same time I had our telephone lines tapped, and eavesdropped on all calls entering or leaving this center. And the person who had to be the spy-courier called Adam Lowiewski, and Lowiewski made an appointment to meet him at the Oppenheimer Village Recreation House to play chess."

"Very suspicious, very suspicious," Lowiewski derided. "I receive a call from a friend at the same time that some anonymous suspect is using the phone. There are only five hundred telephone conversations a minute on this reservation."

"Immediately, Dr. Lowiewski attempted to leave this building," MacLeod went on. "When I intercepted him, he tried to draw a pistol. This one." He exhibited the Beretta. "I am now going to have Dr. Lowiewski searched, in the presence of all of you." He nodded to Alex and the Englishman.

They did their work thoroughly. A pile of Lowiewski's pocket effects was made on the table; as each item was added to it, the Pole made some sarcastic comment.

"And that pack of cigarettes: unopened," he jeered. "I suppose I communicated the data to the manufacturers by telepathy, and they printed it on the cigarette papers in invisible ink."

"Maybe not. Maybe you opened the pack, and then resealed it," Kato suggested. "A heated spatula under the cellophane; like this."

He used the point of his knife to illustrate. The cellophane came unsealed with surprising ease: so did the revenue

stamp. He dumped out the contents of the pack: sixteen cigarettes, four cigarette tip-ends, four bits snapped from the other ends—and a small aluminum microfilm capsule.

Lowiewski's face twitched. For an instant, he tried vainly to break loose from the men who held him. Then he slumped into a chair. Heym ben-Hillel gasped in shocked surprise. Suzanne Maillard gave a short, felinelike cry. Sir Neville Lawton looked at the capsule curiously and said: "Well, my sainted Aunt Agatha!"

"That's the capsule I gave him, at noon," Farida Khouroglu exclaimed, picking it up. She opened it and pulled out a roll of colloidex projection film. There was also a bit of cigarette paper in the capsule, upon which a notation had been made in Kyrilic characters.

Rudolf von Heldenfeld could read Russian. "'Data on new development of photon-neutrino-electron interchange. 22 July, '65. Vladmir.' Vladmir, I suppose, is this *schweinhund's* code name," he added.

The film and the paper passed from hand to hand. The other members of the Team sat down; there was a tendency to move away from the chair occupied by Adam Lowiewski. He noticed this and sneered.

"Afraid of contamination from the moral leper?" he asked. "You were glad enough to have me correct your stupid mathematical errors."

Kato Sugihara picked up the capsule, took a final glance at the cigarette pack, and said to MacLeod: "I'll be back as soon as this is done." With that, he left the room, followed by Bertie Wooster and the Greek.

Heym ben-Hillel turned to the others: his eyes had the hurt and puzzled look of a dog that has been kicked for no reason. "But why did he do this?" he asked.

"He just told you," MacLeod replied. "He's the great Adam Lowiewski. Checking math for a physics-research team is beneath his dignity. I suppose the Komintern offered him a professorship at Stalin University." He was watching Lowiewski's face keenly. "No," he continued. "It was probably the mathematics chair of the Soviet Academy of Sciences."

"But who was this person who could smuggle microfilm out of the reservation?" Suzanne Maillard wanted to know. "Somebody has invented teleportation, then?"

MacLeod shook his head. "It was General Nayland's chauffeur. It had to be. General Nayland's car is the only thing that gets out of here without being searched. The car itself is serviced at Army vehicles pool; nobody could hide anything in it for a confederate to pick up outside. Nayland is a stuffed shirt of the first stuffing, and a tinpot Hitler to boot, but he is fanatically and incorruptibly patriotic. That leaves the chauffeur. When Nayland's in the car, nobody even sees him; he might as well be a robot steering-device. Old case of Father Brown's Invisible Man. So, since he had to be the courier, all I did was have Ahmed Abdel-Rahman shadow him, and at the same time tap our phones. When he contacted Lowiewski, I knew Lowiewski was our traitor."

Sir Neville Lawton gave a strangling laugh. "Oh, my dear Aunt Fanny! And Nayland goes positively crackers on se-

curity. He gets goose pimples every time he hears somebody saying 'E = mc^{2}', for fear a Komintern spy might hear him. It's a wonder he hasn't put the value of Planck's Constant on the classified list. He sets up all these fantastic search rooms and barriers, and then he drives through the gate, honking his bloody horn, with his chauffeur's pockets full of top secrets. Now I've seen everything!"

"Not quite everything," MacLeod said. "Kato's going to put that capsule in another cigarette pack, and he'll send one of his lab girls to Oppenheimer Village with it, with a message from Lowiewski to the effect that he couldn't get away. And when this chauffeur takes it out, he'll run into a Counter Espionage road-block on the way to town. They'll shoot him, of course, and they'll probably transfer Nayland to the Mississippi Valley Flood Control Project, where he can't do any more damage. At least, we'll have him out of our hair."

"If we have any hair left," Heym ben-Hillel gloomed. "You've got Nayland into trouble, but you haven't got us out of it."

"What do you mean?" Suzanne Maillard demanded. "He's found the traitor and stopped the leak."

"Yes, but we're still responsible, as a team, for this betrayal," the Israeli pointed out. "This Nayland is only a symptom of the enmity which politicians and militarists feel toward the Free Scientists, and of their opposition to the research-contract system. Now they have a scandal to use. Our part in stopping the leak will be ignored; the publicity will be about the treason of a Free Scientist."

"That's right," Sir Neville Lawton agreed. "And that brings up another point. We simply can't hand this fellow over to the authorities. If we do, we establish a precedent that may wreck the whole system under which we operate."

"Yes: it would be a fine thing if governments start putting Free Scientists on trial and shooting them," Farida Khouroglu supported him. "In a few years, none of us would be safe."

"But," Suzanne cried, "you are not arguing that this species of an animal be allowed to betray us unpunished?"

"Look," Rudolf von Heldenfeld said. "Let us give him his pistol, and one cartridge, and let him remove himself like a gentleman. He will spare himself the humiliation of trial and execution, and us all the embarrassment of having a fellow scientist pilloried as a traitor."

"Now there's a typical Prussian suggestion," Lowiewski said.

Kato Sugihara, returning alone, looked around the table. "Did I miss something interesting?" he asked.

"Oh, very," Lowiewski told him. "Your Junker friend thinks I should perform *seppuku*."

Kato nodded quickly. "Excellent idea!" he congratulated von Heldenfeld. "If he does, he'll save everybody a lot of trouble. Himself included." He nodded again. "If he does that, we can protect his reputation, after he's dead."

"I don't really see how," Sir Neville objected. "When the Counter Espionage people were brought into this, the thing went out of our control."

"Why, this chauffeur was the spy, as well as the spy-courier," MacLeod said. "The information he transmitted was picked up piecemeal from different indis-

creet lab-workers and students attached to our team. Of course, we are investigating, mumble-mumble. Naturally, no one will admit, mumble-mumble. No stone will be left unturned, mumble-mumble. Disciplinary action, mumble-mumble."

"And I suppose he got that microfilm piecemeal, too?" Lowiewski asked.

"Oh, that?" MacLeod shrugged. "That was planted on him. One of our girls arranged an opportunity for him to steal it from her, after we began to suspect him. Of course, Kato falsified everything he put into that report. As information, it's worthless."

"Worthless? It's better than that," Kato grinned. "I'm really sorry the Komintern won't get it. They'd try some of that stuff out with the big betatron at Smolensk, and a microsecond after they'd throw the switch, Smolensk would look worse than Hiroshima did."

"Well, why would our esteemed colleague commit suicide, just at this time?" Karen Hilquist asked.

"Maybe plutonium poisoning." Farida suggested. "He was doing something in the radiation-lab and got some Pu in him, and of course, shooting's not as painful as that. So—"

"Oh, my dear!" Suzanne protested. "That but stinks! The great Adam Lowiewski, descending from his pinnacle of pure mathematics, to perform a vulgar experiment? With actual *things*?" The Frenchwoman gave an exaggerated shudder. "Horrors!"

"Besides, if our people began getting radioactive, somebody would be sure to claim we were endangering the safely of the whole establishment, and the national-security clause would be invoked, and some nosy person would put a geiger on the dear departed," Sir Neville added.

"Nervous collapse." Karen said. "According to the laity, all scientists are crazy. Crazy people kill themselves. Adam Lowiewski was a scientist. Ergo Adam Lowiewski killed himself. Besides, a nervous collapse isn't instrumentally detectable."

Heym ben-Hillel looked at MacLeod, his eyes troubled.

"But, Dunc; have we the right to put him to death, either by his own hand or by an Army firing squad?" he asked. "Remember he is not only a traitor; he is one of the world's greatest mathematical minds. Have we a right to destroy that mind?"

Von Heldenfeld shouted, banging his fist on the table: "I don't care if he's Gauss and Riemann and Lorenz and Poincare and Minkowski and Whitehead and Einstein, all collapsed into one! The man is a stinking traitor, not only to us, but to all scientists and all sciences! If he doesn't shoot himself, hand him over to the United States, and let them shoot him! Why do we go on arguing?"

Lowiewski was smiling, now. The panic that had seized him in the hallway below, and the desperation when the cigarette pack had been opened, had left him.

"Now I have a modest proposal, which will solve your difficulties," he said. "I have money, papers, clothing, everything I will need, outside the reservation. Suppose you just let me leave here. Then, if there is any trouble, you can use this fiction about the indiscreet underlings, without the unnecessary embel-

lishment of my suicide—"

Rudolf von Heldenfeld let out an inarticulate roar of fury. For an instant he was beyond words. Then he sprang to his feet.

"Look at him!" he cried. "Look at him, laughing in our faces, for the dupes and fools he thinks we are!" He thrust out his hand toward MacLeod. "Give me the pistol! He won't shoot himself; I'll do it for him!"

"It would work, Dunc. Really, it would," Heym ben-Hillel urged.

"No," Karen Hilquist contradicted. "If he left here, everybody would know what had happened, and we'd be accused of protecting him. If he kills himself, we can get things hushed up: dead traitors are good traitors. But if he remains alive, we must disassociate ourselves from him by handing him over."

"And wreck the prestige of the Team?" Lowiewski asked.

"At least you will not live to see that!" Suzanne retorted.

Heym ben-Hillel put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. "Is there no solution to this?" he almost wailed.

"Certainly: an obvious solution," MacLeod said, rising. "Rudolf has just stated it. Only I'm leader of this Team, and there are, of course, jobs a team-leader simply doesn't delegate." The safety catch of the Beretta clicked a period to his words.

"No!" The word was wrenched almost physically out of Lowiewski. He, too, was on his feet, a sudden desperate fear in his face. "No! You wouldn't murder me!"

"The term is 'execute'," MacLeod corrected. Then his arm swung up, and he shot Adam Lowiewski through the forehead.

For an instant, the Pole remained on his feet. Then his knees buckled, and he fell forward against the table, sliding to the floor.

MacLeod went around the table, behind Kato Sugihara and Farida Khouroglu and Heym ben-Hillel, and stood looking down at the man he had killed. He dropped the automatic within a few inches of the dead renegade's outstretched hand, then turned to face the others.

"I regret," he addressed them, his voice and face blank of expression, "to announce that our distinguished colleague, Dr. Adam Lowiewski, has committed suicide by shooting, after a nervous collapse resulting from overwork."

Sir Neville Lawton looked critically at the motionless figure on the floor.

"I'm afraid we'll have trouble making that stick, Dunc," he said. "You shot him at about five yards; there isn't a powder mark on him."

"Oh, sorry; I forgot." MacLeod's voice was mockingly contrite. "It was Dr. Lowiewski's expressed wish that his remains be cremated as soon after death as possible, and that funeral services be held over his ashes. The big electric furnace in the metallurgical lab will do, I think."

"But ... but there'll be all sorts of formalities—" the Englishman protested.

"Now you forget. Our contract," MacLeod reminded him. "We stand upon our contractual immunity: we certainly

won't allow any stupid bureaucratic interference with our deceased colleague's wishes. We have a regular M.D. on our payroll, in case anybody has to have a death certificate to keep him happy, but beyond that—" He shrugged.

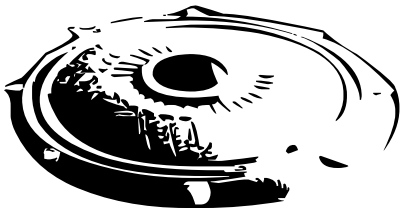
"It burns me up, though!" Suzanne Maillard cried. "After the spaceship is built, and the Moon is annexed to the Western Union, there will be publicity, and people will eulogize this species of an Iscariot!"

Heym ben-Hillel, who had been staring at MacLeod in shocked unbelief, roused himself.

"Well, why not? Isn't the creator of the Lowiewski function transformations and the rules of inverse probabilities worthy of eulogy?" He turned to MacLeod. "I couldn't have done what you did, but maybe it was for the best. The traitor is dead; the mathematician will live forever."

"You miss the whole point," MacLeod said. "Both of you. It wasn't a question of revenge, like gangsters bumping off a double-crosser. And it wasn't a question of whitewashing Lowiewski for posterity. We are the MacLeod Research Team. We owe no permanent allegiance to, nor acknowledge the authority of, any national sovereignty or any combination of nations. We deal with national governments as with equals. In consequence, we must make and enforce our own laws.

"You must understand that we enjoy this status only on sufferance. The nations of the world tolerate the Free Scientists only because they need us, and because they know they can trust us. Now, no responsible government official is going to be deceived for a moment by this suicide story we've confected. It will be fully understood that Lowiewski was a traitor, and that we found him out and put him to death. And, as a corollary, it will be understood that this Team, as a Team, is fully trustworthy, and that when any individual Team member is found to be untrustworthy, he will be dealt with promptly and without public scandal. In other words, it will be understood, from this time on, that the MacLeod Team is worthy of the status it enjoys and the responsibilities concomitant with it."



THE PYGMY PLANET

"Nothing ever happens to me!" Larry Manahan grumbled under his breath, sitting behind his desk at the advertising agency which employed his services in return for the consideration of fifty a week. "All the adventure I know is what I see in the movies, or read about in magazines. What wouldn't I give for a slice of real life!"

Unconsciously, he tensed the muscles of his six feet of lean, hard body. His crisp, flame-colored hair seemed to bristle; his blue eyes blazed. He clenched a brown hammer of a fist.

Larry felt himself an energetic, red-blooded square peg, badly afflicted with the urge for adventure, miserably wedged in a round hole. It is one of the misfortunes of our civilization that a young man who, for example, might have been an excellent pirate a couple of cen-

turies ago, must be kept chained to a desk. And that seemed to be Larry's fate.

"Things happen to other people," he muttered. "Why couldn't an adventure come to me?"

He sat, staring wistfully at a picture of a majestic mountain landscape, soon to be used in the advertising of a railway company whose publicity was handled by his agency, when the jangle of the telephone roused him with a start.

"Oh, Larry—" came a breathless, quivering voice.

Then, with a click, the connection was broken.

The voice had been feminine and had carried a familiar ring. Larry tried to place it, as he listened at the receiver and attempted to get the broken connection restored.

"Your party hung up, and won't answer," the operator informed him.

He replaced the receiver on the hook, still seeking to follow the thin thread of memory given him by the familiar note in that eager excited voice. If only the girl had spoken a few more words!

Then it came to him.

"Agnes Sterling!" he exclaimed aloud.

Agnes Sterling was a slender, elfish, dark-haired girl—lovely, he had thought her, on the occasions of their few brief meetings. Larry knew her as the secretary and laboratory assistant of Dr. Travis Whiting, a retired college professor known for his work on the structure of the atom. Larry had called at the home-laboratory of the savant, months before, to check certain statistics to be used for advertising purposes and had met the girl there. Only a few times since had he seen her.

Now she had called him in a voice that fairly trembled with excitement—and, he thought, dread! And she had been interrupted before she had time to give him any message.

For a few seconds Larry stared at the telephone. Then he rose abruptly to his feet, crammed his hat on his head, and started for the door.

"The way to find adventure is to go after it," he murmured. "And this is the invitation!"

It was not many minutes later that he sprang out of a taxi at the front of the building in which Dr. Travis Whiting made his home and maintained a private experimental laboratory. It was a two-story stucco house, rather out of date, set well back from the sidewalk, with a scrap of lawn and a few straggling shrubs before it. The door was closed, the windows curtained blankly. The place seemed deserted and forbidding.

Larry ran up the uneven brick walk to the door and rang the bell. Impatiently, he waited a few moments. No sound came from within. He felt something ominous, fateful, about the silent mystery that seemed to shroud the old house. For the first time, it occurred to him that Agnes might be in physical danger, as a result of some incautious experiment on the part of Dr. Whiting.

Instinctively, his hand sought the door knob. To his surprise, the door was unlocked. It swung open before him. For a moment he stared, hesitating, into the dark hall revealed beyond. Then, driven by the thought that Agnes might be in

danger, he advanced impulsively.

The several doors opening into the hall were closed. The one at the back, he knew, gave admittance to the laboratory. Impelled by some vague premonition, he hastened toward it down the long hall and threw it open.

As he stepped inside the room, his foot slipped on a spot of something red. Recovering his balance with difficulty, he peered about.

Bending down, Larry briefly examined the red spot on which he had slipped. It was a pool of fresh blood which had not yet darkened. Lying beside it, crimson-splashed, was a revolver. As he picked up the weapon, he cried out in astonishment.

Something had happened to the gun. The trigger guard was torn from it, and the cylinder crushed as if in some resistless grasp; the stock was twisted, and the barrel bent almost into a circle. The revolver had been crumpled by some terrific force—as a soft clay model of it might have been broken by the pressure of a man's hand.

"Crimson shades of Caesar!" he muttered, and dropped the crushed weapon to the floor again.

His eyes swept the silent laboratory.

It was a huge room, taking up all the rear part of the house, from the first floor to the roof. Gray daylight streamed through a sky-light, twenty feet overhead. The ends of the vast room were cluttered with electrical and chemical apparatus; but Larry's eye was caught at once by a strange and complex device, which loomed across from him, in the center of the floor.

Two pillars of intense light, a ray of crimson flame and another of deeply violet radiance, beat straight down from a complicated array of enormous, oddly shaped electron tubes, of mirrors and lenses and prisms, of coils and whirling disks, which reached almost to the roof. Upright, a yard in diameter and almost a yard apart, the strange columns of light were sharp-edged as two transparent cylinders filled with liquid light of ruby and of amethyst. Each ray poured down upon a circular platform of glass or polished crystal.

Hanging between those motionless cylinders of red and violet light was a strange-looking, greenish globe. A round ball, nearly a yard in diameter, hung between the rays, almost touching them. Its surface was oddly splotched with darker and lighter areas. It was spinning steadily, at a low rate of speed. Larry did not see what held it up; it seemed hanging free, several feet above the crystal platforms.

Reluctantly he withdrew his eyes from the mysterious sphere and looked about the room once more. No, the laboratory was vacant of human occupants. No one was hidden among the benches that were cluttered with beakers and test tubes and stills, or among the dynamos and transformers in the other end of the room.

A confusion of questions beat through Larry's brain.

What danger could be haunting this quiet laboratory? Was this the blood of Agnes Sterling or the scientist who employed her that was now clotting on the floor? What terrific force had crumpled up the revolver? What had become of

Agnes and Dr. Whiting? And of whatever had attacked them? Had Agnes called him after the attack, or before?

Despite himself, his attention was drawn back to the little globe spinning so regularly, floating in the air between the pillars of red and violet flame. Floating alone, like a little world in space, without a visible support, it might be held up by magnetic attraction, he thought.

A tiny planet!

His mind quickened at the idea, and he half forgot the weird mystery gathering about him. He stepped nearer the sphere. It was curiously like a miniature world. The irregular bluish areas would be seas; the green and the brown spaces land. In some parts, the surface appeared mistily obscured—perhaps, by masses of cloud.

Larry saw an odd-looking lamp, set perhaps ten feet behind the slowly spinning, floating ball, throwing upon it a bright ray of vividly blue light. Half the strange sphere was brilliantly illuminated by it; the rest was in comparative darkness. That blue lamp, it came to Larry, lit the sphere as the sun lights the earth.

"Nonsense!" he muttered. "It's impossible!"

Aroused by the seeming wonder of it, he was drawn nearer the ball. It spun rather slowly, Larry noted, and each rotation consumed several seconds. He could distinguish green patches that might be forests, and thin, silvery lines that looked like rivers, and broad, red-brown areas that must be deserts, and the broad blue stretches that suggested oceans.

"A toy world!" he cried. "A laboratory planet! What an experiment—"

Then his eyes, looking up, caught the glistening, polished lens of a powerful magnifying glass which hung by a black ribbon from a hook on one of the heavy steel beams which supported the huge mass of silently whirring apparatus.

Eagerly, he unfastened the magnifier. Holding it before his eyes, he bent toward the strange sphere spinning steadily in the air.

"Suffering shades of Caesar!" he ejaculated.

Beneath the lens a world was racing. He could see masses of vividly green forest; vast expanses of bare, cracked, ocherous desert; wastes of smooth blue ocean.

Then he was gazing at—a city?

Larry could not be sure that he had seen correctly. It had slipped very swiftly beneath his lens. But he had a momentary impression of tiny, fantastic buildings, clustered in an elflike city.

A pygmy planet, spinning in the laboratory like a world in the gulf of space! What could it mean? Could it be connected with the strange call from Agnes, with the blood on the floor, with the strange and ominous silence that shrouded the deserted room?

"Oh, Larry!" a clear, familiar voice rang suddenly from the door. "You came!"

Startled, Larry leaped back from the tiny, whirling globe and turned to the door. A girl had come silently into the room. It was Agnes Sterling. Her dark hair was tangled. Her small face was flushed, and her brown eyes were wide with fear!

In a white hand, which shook a little, she carried a small, gold-plated automatic pistol.

She ran nervously across the wide floor to Larry, with relief dawning in her eyes.

"I'm so glad you came!" she gasped, panting with excitement. "I started to call you on the phone, but then I was afraid it would kill you if you came! Please be careful! It may come back, any minute! You'd better go away! It just took Dr. Whiting!"

"Wait a minute," Larry put in. "Just one thing at a time. Let's get this straight. To begin with, what is it that might kill me, and that got the doctor?"

"It's terrible!" she gasped, trembling. "A monster! You must go away before it comes back!"

Larry drew a tall stool from beside one of the crowded tables and placed it beside her.

"Don't get excited," he urged. "I'm sure everything will be all right. Just sit down, and tell me about it. The whole story. Just what is going on here, and what happened to Dr. Whiting."

He helped her upon the stool. She looked up at him gratefully, and began to speak in a rapid voice.

"You see that little planet? The monster came from that and carried the doctor back there. And I know it will soon be back for another victim—for sacrifice!"

She had pointed across the great room, toward the strange little globe which hung between the pillars of red and violet light.

"Please go slow!" Larry broke in. "You're too fast for me. Are you trying to tell me that that spinning ball is really a planet?"

Agnes seemed a little more composed, though she was still flushed and breathing rapidly. Her small hand still gripped the bright automatic.

"Yes, it is a planet. The Pygmy Planet, Dr. Whiting called it. He said it was the great experiment of the century. You see, he was testing evolution. We began with the planet, young and hot, and watched it until it is now almost as old as Mars. We watched the change and development of life upon it. And the rise and decay of a strange civilization. Until now its people are strange things, with human brains in mechanical bodies, worshiping a rusty machine like a god—"

"Go slow!" Larry pleaded again. "I don't see—Did the doctor build—create—that planet himself?"

"Yes. It began with his work on atomic structure. He discovered that certain frequencies of the X-ray—so powerful that they are almost akin to the cosmic ray—have the power of altering electronic orbits. Every atom, you know, is a sort of solar system, with electrons revolving about a proton.

"And these rays would cause the electrons to fall into incredibly smaller orbits, causing vast reduction in the size of the atoms, and in the size of any object which the atoms formed. They would cause anything, living or dead, to shrink to inconceivably microscopic dimensions—or restore it to its former size, depending upon the exact wave-length used.

"And time passes far more swiftly for the tiny objects—probably because the electrons move faster in their smaller or-

bits. That is what suggested to Dr. Whiting that he would be able to watch the entire life of a planet, in the laboratory. And so, at first, we experimented merely with solitary specimens or colonies of animals.

"But on the Pygmy Planet, we have watched the life of a world—the whole panorama of evolution—"

"It seems too wonderful!" Larry muttered. "Could Dr. Whiting actually decrease his size and become a dwarf?"

"No trick at all," Agnes assured him. "All you have to do is stand in the violet beam, to shrink. And move over in the red one, when you want to grow. I have been several times with Dr. Whiting to the Pygmy Planet."

"Been—" Larry stopped, breathless with astonishment.

"See the little airplane," Agnes said, pointing under the table.

Larry gasped.

Beneath the table stood a toy airplane. The spread of its glistening, perfect wings was hardly three feet. A wonderful, delicate toy, accurate in every detail of propeller, motor and landing gear, of brace and rudder and aileron. Then he realized that it was no toy at all, but a faithful miniature of a commercial plane. A complete, tiny copy of one of the latest single-motor, cabin monoplane models.

"It looks like it would fly," he said "a friend of mine his a big one, just like it! Taught me to fly it, last summer vacation. This is the very image of it!"

"It will fly!" Agnes assured him, now composed enough to smile at his amazement. "I have been with the doctor to the Pygmy Planet in it.

"You stand in the violet ray until you're about three inches high," she explained, "and then get into the plane. Then you fly up and into the violet ray at the point where it touches the planet, and remain there while you grow smaller. When you are the right size, all you have to do is drop to the surface, and land. To come away, you rise into the red ray and stay in it till you grow to proper size, when you come down and land."

"You—you've actually done that?" he gasped. "It sounds like a fairy story!"

"Yes, I've done it," she assured him. Then she shuddered apprehensively. "And the things—the machine-monsters, Dr. Whiting called them—have learned to do it, too. One of them came down the red ray, and attacked him. The doctor had a gun—but what could he do against one of those?" She shivered.

"It carried him back up the violet beam. Just a few minutes ago, I started to phone you. Then I was afraid you would be hurt—"

"Me, hurt?" Larry burst out. "What about you, here alone?"

"It was my business. Dr. Whiting told me there might be danger, when he hired me."

"And now, what can we do?" Larry demanded.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "I'm afraid one of the monsters will be back after a new victim. We could smash the apparatus, but it is too wonderful to be destroyed. And besides, Dr. Whiting may have escaped. He may be alive there, in the deserts!"

"We might fly up, in the little plane," Larry proposed, doubtfully. "I think I could pilot it. If you want—"

The girl's body stiffened. Her brown eyes widened with sudden dread, and her small face went pale. She slipped quickly from the stool, drawing in her breath with a sort of gasp. The hand that gripped the automatic trembled a little.

"What's the matter?" Larry cried.

"I thought—" she gasped, "I think I see something in the ray! The machine-monster is coming back!"

Her lips tightened. She lifted the little automatic and began to shoot into the pillar of crimson fire beside the tiny, spinning globe.

Larry, watching tensely, saw a curious, bird-like something fluttering about in the red ray, swiftly growing larger!

Deliberately, and pausing to aim carefully for each shot, the girl emptied the little gun at the figure. Her body was rigid, her small face was firmly set, though she was breathing very fast.

A curious numbness had come over Larry. His only physical sensations were the quick hammering of his heart, and a parching dryness in his throat. Terror stiffened him. Though he would not have admitted it, he was paralyzed with fear.

The glittering thing that fluttered about in the crimson ray was not an easy target. When the gun was empty, it seemed still unharmed. And its wings had increased to a span of a foot.

"Too late!" Agnes gasped. "Why didn't we do something?"

Trembling, horror-stricken, she shrank toward Larry.

He was staring at the thing in the pillar of scarlet light.

It had dropped to the crystal disk upon which the red ray fell from the huge, glowing tube above. It stood there, motionless except for the swift increase of its size.

Larry gazed at it, lost in fear and wonder. It was like nothing he had ever seen. What was it that Agnes had said, of machine-monsters, of human brains in mechanical bodies? His brain reeled. He strained his eyes to distinguish the monstrosity more clearly. It was veiled in crimson flame; he could not see it distinctly.

But suddenly, when it was as tall as himself, it sprang out into the room, toward Larry and the shuddering girl. Just off the crystal disk, beyond the scarlet pillar of fire, it paused for long seconds, seeming to regard them with malevolent eyes.

For the first time, Larry could see it plainly.

Its body, or its central part, was a tube of transparent crystal; an upright cylinder, rounded at upper and lower ends. It was nearly a foot in diameter, and four feet long. It seemed filled with a luminous, purple liquid.

About the cylinder were three bands of greenish, glistening metal. Attached to the lower band were four jointed legs of the same bright green metal, upon which the strange thing stood.

Set in the middle band were two glittering, polished lenses, which seemed to serve as eyes, and Larry felt that they were gazing at him with malevolent menace. Behind the eyes, two wings sprang from the green band. Ingenious, folding

wings, of thin plates and bars of green metal.

And from the upper band sprang four slender, glistening, whip-like tentacles, metallic and brilliantly green, two yards in length. They writhed with strange life!

It seemed a long time to Larry that the thing stood, motionless, seeming to stare evilly at them with eye-like lenses. Then, lurching forward a little, it moved toward them upon legs of green metal. And now Larry saw another amazing thing about it.

Floating in the brilliant violet liquid that filled the crystal tube was a gray mass, wrinkled and corrugated. This was divided by deep clefts into right and left hemispheres, which, in turn were separated into larger upper and smaller lower segments. White filaments ran through the violet liquid from its base toward the three rings or bands of green metal that encircled the cylinder.

In an instant, Larry realized that the gray mass was a human brain. The larger, upper part the cerebrum, the smaller mass at the back the cerebellum. And the white filaments were nerves, by means of which this brain controlled its astounding, mechanical body!

A brain in a machine!

The violet liquid, it came to Larry in his trance of wonder, must take the place of blood, feeding the brain-cells, absorbing waste.

An eternal mind, within a machine! Free from the ills and weaknesses of the body. And devoid, too, of any pity, of any tender feelings. A cold and selfish mind, without emotion—unless it might worship itself or its mechanical body.

It was this monster that had spilt the pool of blood drying on the floor, near the door. And it was these glistening, green, snake-like tentacles that had crumpled the revolver into a broken mass of steel!

Abruptly the machine-monster darted forward, running swiftly upon its four legs of green metal. Slender tentacles reached out toward the shuddering girl at Larry's shoulder.

"Run!" Agnes gasped to him, quickly. "It will kill you!"

The girl tried to push him back.

As she touched him, Larry recovered from his daze of wondering fear. Agnes was in frightful danger, and facing it with quiet courage. He must find a weapon!

Wildly, he looked about him. His eyes fell upon the tall, heavy wooden stool, upon which Agnes had been sitting.

"Get back!" he shouted to her.

He snatched up the stool, and, swinging it over his head, sprang toward the machine of violet-filled crystal and glittering green metal.

"Stop!" Agnes screamed, in a terrified voice. "You can't—"

She had run before him. He seized her arm and swung her back behind him. Then he advanced warily toward the machine-monster, which had paused and seemed to be regarding him with sinister intentness, through its glistening crystal eye-lenses.

With all his strength, Larry struck at the crystal cylinder, swinging the stool like an ax. A slender, metallic green tentacle whipped out, tore the stool from his hands, and sent it crashing across the room, to splinter into fragments on the

opposite wall.

Larry, sent off his balance, staggered toward the glittering machine. As he stumbled against the transparent tube that contained the brain, he clenched his fist to strike futilely at it.

A snake-like metal tentacle wrapped itself about him; he was hurled to the floor, to sprawl grotesquely among broken apparatus.

His head came against the leg of a bench. For a few moments he was dazed. But it seemed only a few seconds to him before he had staggered to his feet, rubbing his bruised head. Anxiously, he peered about the room.

The machine-monster and Agnes were gone!

He stumbled back to the mass of apparatus in the center of the huge laboratory. Intently, he gazed into the upright pillar of crimson flame. Nothing was visible there.

"No, the other!" he gasped. "The violet is the way they went."

He turned to the companion ray of violet radiance that beat straight down on the opposite side of the tiny, whirling planet. And in that motionless torrent of chill violet flame he saw them.

Tiny, already, and swiftly dwindling!

With green wings outspread, the machine-monster was beating swiftly upward through the pillar of purple-blue flame. And close against the crystal tube that contained its brain, was Agnes, held fast by the whip-like tentacles of glistening green metal.

Larry moved to spring after them, into the torrent of violet light. But sudden caution restrained him.

"I'd shrink, too!" he muttered. "And then where would I be? I'd be standing on the glass platform, I guess. And the thing flying off over my head!"

He gazed at the rapidly dwindling forms of Agnes Sterling and her amazing abductor. As it grew smaller, the machine-monster flew higher in the violet beam, until it was opposite the tiny, spinning planet.

The distance between the red and the violet rays was just slightly more than the diameter of the pygmy world. The sphere hung between them, one side of it a fraction of an inch from the red, the other as near the violet.

Opposite the elfin planet, the monster ceased to climb. It hung there in the violet ray, an inch from the surface of the little world.

And still it swiftly dwindled. It was no larger than a fly, and Larry could barely distinguish the form of the girl, helpless in the green tentacles.

Soon she and the monster became a mere greenish speck.... Suddenly they were gone.

For a little time he stood watching the point where they had vanished, watching the red and the violet rays that poured straight down upon the crystal disks, watching the tiny, green-blue planet spinning so steadily between the bright rays.

Abruptly, he recovered from his fascination of wonder.

"What did she say?" he muttered. "Something about the monsters carrying off people to sacrifice to a rusty machine that they worship as a god! It took her—for that!"

He clenched his fists; his lips became a straight line of determination.

"Then I guess we try a voyage in the little plane. A slim chance, maybe. But decidedly better than none!"

He returned to the table, dropped on his knees, inspected the tiny airplane. A perfect miniature, delicately beautiful; its slim, small wings were bright as silver foil. Carefully, he opened the door and peered into the diminutive cabin. Two minute rifles, several Lilliputian pistols, and boxes of ammunition to match, lay on the rear seat of the plane.

"So we are prepared for war," he remarked, grinning in satisfaction. "And the next trick, I suppose, is to get shrunk to fit the plane. About three inches, she said. Lord, it's a queer thing to think about!"

He got to his feet, walked back to the machine in the center of the room, with its twin pillars of red and violet flame, and the tiny world floating between them. He started to step into the violet ray, then hesitated, shivering involuntarily, like a swimmer about to dive into icy cold water.

Turning back to one of the benches, he picked up a wooden funnel-rack, and tossed it to the crystal disk beneath the violet ray. Slowly it decreased in size, until it had vanished from sight.

"Safe, I suppose," he muttered. "But how do I know when I'm small enough?"

After a moment he picked up a glass bottle which measured about three inches in height, set it on the floor, beside the crystal disk.

"I dive out when I get to be the size of the bottle," he murmured.

With that, he leaped into the violet beam.

He felt no unusual sensation, except one of pleasant, tingling warmth, as if the direct rays of the sun were bearing down upon him. For a moment he feared that his size was not being affected. Then he noticed, not that he appeared to become smaller, but that the laboratory seemed to be growing immensely larger.

The walls seemed to race away from him. The green-blue sphere of the tiny planet which he proposed to visit expanded and drew away above his head.

Abruptly fearful, alarmed at the hugeness of the room, he turned to look at the bottle he had placed to serve as a standard of size. It had grown with everything else, until it seemed to be about three feet high.

And it was swiftly expanding. It reached to the level of his shoulder. And higher!

He ran to the edge of the crystal disk, which now seemed a floor many yards across, and leaped from its edge. It was a dozen steps to where he had left the bottle. And it was as tall as himself!

He started across the floor of the laboratory toward the table under which the toy plane stood. The incredible immensity of his surroundings awed him strangely. The walls of the room seemed distant, Cyclopean cliffs; the roof was like a sky. Table legs towered up like enormous columns.

It seemed a hundred yards across the strangely rough floor to the plane. As he drew near it, it gave him huge satisfaction to see that it was of normal size, correctly proportioned to his own dimen-

sions.

"Great luck," he muttered, "that I can fly!"

He paused, as he reached the cabin's open door, to wonder at the astounding fact that a little while ago he had opened that door with a hand larger than his entire body now was.

"I guess this is my day of wonders!" he muttered. "Allah knows I had to wait long enough for it!"

First he examined the weapons in the cabin. There were two heavy sporting rifles and two .45 automatics. There were also two smaller automatics, which, he supposed, had been intended for Agnes' use. And there was abundant ammunition.

Then he inspected the plane. It looked to be in excellent condition in every way. The gasoline and oil tanks were full.

He set about starting the motor, using the plane's inertia starter, which was driven by an electric motor. Soon the engine coughed, sputtered, and gave rise to a roaring, rhythmic note that Larry found musical.

When the motor was warm, he opened the throttle and taxied out from beneath the colossal table, and across the laboratory floor toward the Titanic mechanism in the center of the room. The disk of crystal was set almost flush with the floor, its edge beveled. The plane rolled easily upon it, and out into the Cyclopean pillar of violet flame.

Once more, Larry felt the sensation that everything about him except the plane itself, was expanding inconceivably in size. Soon the laboratory's walls and roof were lost in hazy blue distance. He could distinguish only the broad, bright field formed by the surface of the crystal disk, with the floor stretching away beyond it like a vast plain. And above, the green-blue sphere of the tiny planet, bright on one side and dark on the other, so that it looked like a half-moon, immensely far-off.

As he waited, he noticed a curious little dial, in a lower corner of the instrument board, which he had not seen at first. One end of its graduated scale was marked, "Earth Normal," the other, "Pygmy Planet Normal." A tiny black needle was creeping slowly across the scale, toward "Pygmy Planet Normal."

"That's how we tell what size we are without having to look at a bottle," he muttered.

When the area of the crystal platform appeared to be about half a square mile, he decided that he would now have sufficient space to spiral up the violet ray toward the planet. If he waited too long to start, the distance would become impossibly great.

He gave the little plane the gun. The motor thundered a throbbing song; the ship rolled smoothly forward over the polished surface, gained flying speed and took the air without a shock.

"Feels good to hold the stick again!" Larry murmured.

Making small circles to keep within the upright pillar of violet radiance, he climbed steadily and as rapidly as possible, keeping his eyes upon the brilliant half-moon of the Pygmy Planet.

The strangest flight in the annals of aviation! He was flying toward a goal that,

a few minutes before, he could have touched. Toward a goal that, at the beginning of his flight, was only a few lengths of his plane away. And his size dwindled so rapidly as he flew that the planet seemed to swell and draw away from him.

As Larry and the plane grew smaller, the relative size of the violet ray increased, so there was no longer much danger of flying out of it. It seemed that he flew through a world of violet flame.

He met a curious problem in time. It is evident that time passes faster for a small animal than for a large one, because nerve currents require a shorter time in transit, and all thought and action is consequently speeded up. It took a hundred-foot dinosaur nearly a second to know that his tail had been pinched. A fly can get under way in time to escape a descending swatter. The Pygmy Planet rotated in a few seconds of earth time; one of its inhabitants might have lived, aged, and died in the duration of a single day in our larger world.

So Larry found that time seemed to pass more rapidly, or rather that the time of the world he had left appeared to move more slowly, as he adventured into smallness. He had been flying, it seemed to him, nearly an hour when he reached the level of the planet's equator.

Now it seemed a vast world, filling half the visible universe. He flew toward it steadily, until he knew, by the fading before him of the violet flame which now seemed to fill all space, that he was near the edge of the ray. And as he flew, he watched the little scale, upon which the black needle was now nearing the line marked, "Pygmy Planet Normal."

Circling slowly, keeping always on the level of the planet's equator, and near the edge of the violet ray, so as to be as close as possible to his landing place when he reached the proper size, he watched the creeping black needle.

Too, he scanned with eager eyes the planet floating before him. Bare, red deserts; narrow strips of green vegetation; shrunken, blue oceans; silvery lines of rivers, passed in fascinating panorama beneath his eyes. The rate of the planet's spinning seemed continually to lessen, with the changing of his own sense of time.

Agnes! Larry thought of her with a curious, eager pain in his heart. She was somewhere on that strange, ancient world, a prisoner of weird machine-monsters! Intended victim of a grotesque sacrificial ceremony!

Could he find her, in the vastness of an unfamiliar world? And having found her, would there be a chance to rescue her from her hideous captors? The project seemed insane. But Larry felt a queer, unfamiliar urge, which, he knew, would drive him on until he had discovered and saved her—or until he was dead.

At last, when it seemed to Larry nearly three hours since he had begun this amazing flight, the crawling ebon needle reached the mark, "Pygmy Planet Normal."

He flew out of the wall of violet flame toward the planet's surface. Before, the distance between the planet and the ray's edge had seemed only the fraction of an inch. Now it appeared to be many miles.

Abruptly the Pygmy Planet, which had seemed to be beside him, appeared

to swing about, so that it was beneath him. He knew that it was a change merely in his sensations. He was feeling the gravitation of the new world. It was pulling him toward it!

He cut the throttle, and settled the plane into a long glide, a glide that was to end upon the surface of a new planet!

In what seemed half an hour more, Larry had made a safe landing upon the Pygmy Planet. He had come down upon a stretch of fairly smooth, red, sandy desert, which seemed to stretch illimitably toward the rising sun, which direction Larry instinctively termed "east."

To the "west" was a line of dull green—evidently the vegetation along a stream. The ocher desert was scattered with sparse clumps of reddish, spiky scrub. Larry taxied the plane into one of those thickets. Finding canvas and rope in the cabin, he staked down the machine, and muffled the motor.

Then, selecting a rifle and a heavy automatic from the weapons in the cabin, and filling his pockets with extra ammunition, he left the plane and set out with brisk steps toward the green line of vegetation.

"I'll follow along the river," he reasoned. "It may lead me somewhere and it will show the way back to the plane. I may come across something in the way of a clue. Can't go exploring by air, or I'll burn up all the gas and be stranded here!"

To his surprise, the water course proved to be an ancient canal, walled with crumbling masonry. Its channel was choked with mud and thorny, thick-leaved desert shrubs of unfamiliar variety; but a feeble current still flowed along it.

After some reflection, Larry set out along the banks of the canal.

He followed it for two days.

Curious straight bars of light were visible across the sky—a band of violet in the morning; one of crimson at evening. Their apparent motion was in the same direction as that of the sun. The bars of light puzzled him considerably before it occurred to him that they must be the red and violet rays.

"So you wait till evening, and then fly up into the red ray, to go home," he muttered. "But I may not need that information," he added grimly. "Seems to be a pretty big job to search a planet on foot, for one person. And I'm not going back without Agnes!"

In the afternoon of the second day, he came within view of a city. He could discern vast, imposing walls and towers of dark stone. It stood in the barren red desert, far back from the green line of the old canal. Larry left the canal and started wearily across toward it. He had covered several miles of the distance before he saw that the lofty towers were falling, the magnificent walls crumbling. The city was ruined, dead, deserted!

The realization brought him a great flood of despair. He had hoped to find people—friends, from whom he might get food, and information about this unfamiliar planet. But the city was dead.

Larry was standing there, in the midst of the vast red plain between ruined city and ruined canal. Tired, hungry, lonely and hopeless. He was looking up at the white "sun," trying to comfort himself with the thought that the brilliant lumi-

nary was merely a queer blue lamp, that he was upon a tiny experimental world in a laboratory. But the thought brought him no relief; only confusion and a sense of incredulity.

Then he saw the machine-monster.

A glittering, winged thing of crystal and green metal, identical with the one he had encountered in the laboratory. It must already have seen him, for it was dropping swiftly toward him.

Larry started to run, took a few staggering steps. Then he recalled the heavy rifle slung over his shoulder. Moving with desperate haste, he got it into his hands and raised it just as the monster dropped to the red sand a dozen yards away from him.

Steadily he covered the crystal cylinder within which the thing's brain floated in luminous violet liquid. His finger tightened on the trigger, ready to send a heavy bullet crashing into it. Then he paused, swore softly, lowered the gun.

"If I kill it," he murmured, "I may never find Agnes. And if I let it carry me off, it may take me where she is."

He walked toward the monster, across the red sand.

It stood uncertainly upon green metal legs, seeming to stare at him strangely with eye-like lenses. Its wings of thin green metal plates, were folded; its four green tentacles were twitching oddly.

Abruptly, it sprang upon him.

A green tentacle seized the rifle and snatched it from his hands. He felt the automatic pistol and the ammunition being removed from his pockets.

Then, firmly held in the flexible arms of green metal, he was lifted against the cylinder of violet liquid. The monster spread its broad emerald wings, and Larry was swiftly borne into the air.

In a few moments the wide ruins of the ancient city were spread below, with the green line of the choked canal cutting the infinite red waste of the desert beyond it.

The monster flew westward.

For a considerable time, nothing save barren, ocherous desert was in view. Then Larry's weird captor flew near a strange city. A city of green metal. The buildings were most fantastic—pyramids of green, crowned with enormous, glistening spheres of emerald metal. An impassable wall surrounding the city.

Larry had expected the monster to drop into the city. But it carried him on, and finally settled to the ground several miles beyond. The green tentacles released him, as the thing landed, and he sprawled beside it, dizzy after his strange flight.

As Larry staggered uncertainly to his feet, he saw that the monster had released him in an open pen. It was a square area, nearly fifty yards on each side, and fenced with thin posts or rods of green metal, perhaps twenty feet high. Set very close together, and sharply pointed at the top, they formed a barrier apparently insurmountable.

In the center of the pen was a huge and strange machine, built of green metal. It looked very worn and ancient; it was covered with patches of bluish rust or corrosion. At first it looked quite strange to Larry; then he was struck by a vaguely familiar quality about it. Looking closer, he realized that it was a colossal steam hammer!

Its design, of course, was unfamiliar. But in the vast, corroded frame he quickly picked out a steam chest, cylinder, and the great hammer, weighing many tons.

He gasped when his eyes went to the anvil.

A man was chained across it.

A man in torn, grimy clothing, fastened with fetters of green metal upon wrists and ankles, so that his body was stretched beneath the massive hammer. He seemed to be unconscious; upon his head, which was turned toward Larry, was a red and swollen bruise.

The monster which had dropped Larry within the pen rose again into the air. And Larry started forward, trying to remember just what Agnes had told him of a machine to which the monsters sacrificed.

This must be the machine—this ancient steam hammer!

As he moved forward, Agnes came into view.

She walked around the massive base of the great machine, carrying a bowl filled with a fragrant brown liquid. She stopped at sight of Larry, and uttered a little cry. The bowl fell from her hands, and the fragrant liquid splashed out on the ground. Her brown eyes went wide with delighted surprise; then a look of pain came into them.

"Larry, Larry!" she cried. "Why did you come?"

"To get you," he answered, trying to speak as lightly as he could. "And the best way I knew to find you was to let one of the monsters bring me. Cheer up!" But even to himself, his voice had a tone of discouragement.

She smiled wanly. "I don't see anything to be cheerful about." Her small face was set and a little white. "Dr. Whiting is going to be smashed under the hammer of this dreadful machine, whenever the steam is up. Then it is my turn. And yours. That's nothing to laugh about."

"But we aren't smashed yet!" Larry insisted.

"By the way, what was that in the bowl?" he went on, glancing down. "I forgot to bring lunch." He grinned.

She looked down, startled.

"Oh. Dr. Whiting's soup. Poor fellow, I'm afraid he'll never awake to eat it. There's plenty more. Come around here."

She picked up the bowl and led him around the base of the machine; then she filled the bowl again with the fragrant, red-brown liquid, from a tall urn of green metal. Larry took the dish eagerly and gulped down the rather insipid and tasteless food.

"And the monsters worship this old steam hammer?" he inquired, when his hunger was appeased.

"Yes. I think the thing is worked by steam generated by volcanic heat. Anyhow, there isn't any boiler, and the steam pipe comes up out of the ground. You can see that. So it runs on, without any attention—though I guess the heat is dying down, since it is several days between blows of the hammer.

"And I guess the monsters have forgotten how they used to rule machines. They seem to have depended upon machines, even giving up their own bodies for mechanical ones, until the machine

rules them.

"And when this old hammer kept pounding on through the ages, using volcanic steam, I guess they got to considering it alive. They began to regard it as a sort of god. And when they got the idea of giving it sacrifices, it was natural enough to place the victims under the hammer."

They went back to Dr. Whiting who was chained across the anvil. He was still breathing, but unconscious. He had been injured in a struggle with the monsters, and his body was much emaciated. Agnes explained that he had been a prisoner in the pen for many months of the time of this world, waiting his turn to die; she said that the monsters had just completed the extermination of another race upon the Pygmy Planet, and were just turning to the greater world for victims.

Larry noticed that the great hammer was slowly rising in its guides, as the pressure of the steam from the planet's interior increased. In a few hours—just at sunset—it reached the top of its stroke.

The air above the pen was suddenly filled with glittering swarms of the green-winged monsters, sweeping slowly about, in measured flight, with strange order in their masses. They had come to witness the sacrifice!

With an explosive rush of steam, the hammer came down!

The ground trembled beneath the terrific blow; the roaring of escaping steam and the crash of the impact were almost deafening. A heavy white cloud shrouded the corroded green machine.

When the hammer slowly lifted, only a red smear was left....

Agnes had shrunk, trembling, against Larry's shoulder. He had put his arms about her and was holding her almost fiercely.

"My turn next," she whispered. "And don't try to fight them. It will only make them hurt you!"

"I can't let them take you, Agnes!" Larry cried, in an agonized tone. And the words seemed to leap out, of themselves, "Because I love you!"

"You do?" Agnes cried, in a thin, choking voice, pressing herself against him. "Ever since the first time you came to the laboratory—"

A score of the monster forms of violet-filled crystal and gleaming green metal had dropped into the pen. They tore Agnes from Larry's arms, hurling him roughly to the ground, at the bottom of the green metal fence. For some time he was unconscious.

When he had staggered painfully to his feet, it was night. The monsters were gone; the starless sky was black and empty. Calling out weakly, and stumbling about the pen, he found Agnes. She was chained where Dr. Whiting had been.

She was conscious, unharmed. For a time they talked a little, exchanging broken, incoherent phrases. Then they went to sleep, lying on the anvil, beneath that mighty hammer that was slowly lifting to strike another fearful blow.

When the "sun" had risen again, Larry brought Agnes some of the brown soup from the metal urn, which had been filled again. Then, when he had satisfied himself, he started clambering up the massive frame of the hammer.

If he could put it out of commission!

It was a difficult task. He slipped back many times, and finally had to choose another place to make the ascent. Twice he slipped and almost fell from a considerable height. But finally he reached the massive wheel of the valve which seemed to control the admission of steam into the cylinder above the hammer.

If he could but close that, the steam would be confined in the chest below. And when the pressure reached a certain point, something should happen!

The valve was not easy to turn; it seemed fixed with the corrosion of ages. For hours Larry wrestled with it. Then he left it, realizing that he must find something to use for a hammer. A vigorous search of the pen's hard earth floor failed to reveal any stone that would do. He turned his attention to the machine, and presently saw a slender projecting lever, high up on the side of the vast frame, which looked as if it had been weakened by corrosion. After a perilous climb, he reached the bar of green metal and swung his weight upon it. It broke, and he plunged to the ground with the bar in his hands.

Clambering up once more to the great valve, he hammered it until the rust that stiffened it was loosened. Then he struggled with the valve until it was closed.

"We'll see what happens!" he muttered.

Returning to the ground, he set to work to break the green metal fetters upon Agnes' wrists and ankles, using the broken lever as hammer and file.

For the greater part of six days he toiled at that task, while the great hammer rose slowly. But the green metal seemed very hard. One arm was free at the end of the second day, the other on the fourth. He had one ankle loose on the morning of the sixth day. But as evening came on, and the great hammer reached the top of its stroke, the fourth chain still defied him.

Before sunset, a swarm of the monsters appeared, wheeling on green wings. He was forced to leave the work, hiding his improvised file.

Agnes still lay across the anvil, to conceal from the monsters the fact that the chains were broken. Larry sat close beside her, nursing hands that were blistered and sore from his days of filing at the chains.

A sudden clatter came from the huge mechanism above them, and a sharp hiss of steam, which became louder.

"It works!" Larry whispered to Agnes. "The old valve held, and the steam can't get into the cylinder to smash us! But Allah knows what will happen when the pressure rises in that old steam chest!"

Darkness came. Dusk swallowed the wheeling machine-monsters. All night Larry and Agnes waited silently, together on the great anvil, listening to the hissing of steam from above, which was slowly becoming a shrill monotonous scream; monotonous, always higher, shriller.

The "sun" rose again. Still the green-winged monsters wheeled about. They came in glittering swarms, thousands of them. They came nearer the machine now, and flew about more swiftly, is if excited.

Then it happened.

There was a roar like thunder, and a colossal, bellowing explosion. The air was filled suddenly with scalding steam, and with screaming fragments of the bursting steam chest. In the midst of it all, Larry felt a crushing blow upon the head. And a blanket of darkness fell upon him....

"The monsters are all gone, darling," Agnes' voice reached him. "As though they were very much frightened. And a piece of the old hammer hit the fence and knocked a hole in it. You must go. Leave me—"

"Leave you?" Larry groaned, struggling to sit up. "Not a bit of it!" He touched his head gingerly, felt a swollen bruise.

Collecting a few fragments of the wrecked machine, to serve as tools, he fell to work again upon Agnes' remaining chain. Already he had cut a deep groove in it. Two hours later, it was broken.

Carrying the metal urn of brownish liquid, they crept out through the hole in the fence, which had been torn by the flying fragment of a broken casting of green metal. They left the wreck of the machine which a strange race had worshiped as a bloody god and hurried furtively into the desert of red sand.

Making a wide circuit about the fantastic city of green metal, which Larry had seen from the air, they struck out eastward across the desolate ocherous waste. The food in the urn, eaten sparingly, lasted until the end of the eighth day.

On the morning of the ninth, they came in view of the green line of the ancient canal. It was hours later that they staggered weakly over its wall of crumbling masonry, clambered down into the muddy, weed-grown channel, and drank thirstily of green, tepid water.

Larry found his old trail, beyond the canal. They followed it back. In the middle of the afternoon they stumbled up to the thicket of spiky desert growth, in which Larry had hidden the plane.

The machine was undamaged.

Before sunset, Larry had removed the stake ropes, slipped the canvas cover from the motor, turned the plane around, inspected it, and examined the strip of smooth, hard red sand upon which he had landed.

Agnes pointed out the dim band of crimson across the sky, from north to south, slowly rising toward the zenith.

"That's the red ray," she said. "We fly into it."

"And a happy moment when we do," Larry rejoined.

He roused the motor to life.

As the bar of crimson light neared the zenith, the plane rolled forward across the sand and took off. Climbing steeply, Larry anxiously watched the approach of the red band. The gravitation of the Pygmy Planet seemed to diminish as he gained altitude, until presently he could fly vertically from it, without circling at all. He set the bow toward the scarlet bar across the sky before him.

And suddenly he was flying through ruby flame.

His eyes went to the little scale at the corner of the instrument board. He saw the little ebon needle waver, leave the mark designated "Pygmy Planet Normal" and start toward "Earth Normal."

For what seemed a long time, he was wheeling down the crimson ray. A few

times he looked back at Agnes, in the rear seat. She had gone to sleep.

Then a vast, circular field was below—the crystal platform.

Larry landed the plane upon it, taxied to the center and stopped there, with the motor idling. The laboratory, taking shape in the blue abyss about him, seemed to contract swiftly.

Presently the plane covered most of the crystal disk. He taxied quickly off, stopped on the floor nearby, and cut the ignition. Agnes woke. Together they clambered from the plane's cabin and walked back into the crimson ray.

Once more the vast spaces of the room seemed to shrink, until it looked familiar once more. The Pygmy Planet, and the huge machine looming ever them, dwindled to natural size.

Agnes, watching a scale on the frame of the mechanism, which Larry had not noticed, leaped suddenly from the red ray, drawing him with her.

"We don't want to be giants!" she laughed.

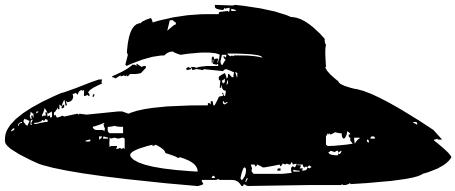
Larry drew a deep breath, and looked about him. Once more he was in his own world, and surveying it in his normal size. He became aware of Agnes standing close against him. He suddenly took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Wait a minute," she objected, slipping quickly from his arms. "What are we going to do about the Pygmy Planet? Those monsters might come again, even if you did wreck their god. And Dr. Whiting, poor fellow—But we mustn't let those monsters come back!"

Larry doubled up a brown fist and drove it with all his strength against the little globe that spun so steadily between the twin, upright cylinders of crimson and of violet flame. His hand went deep into it. And it swung from its position, hung unsteadily a moment, and then crashed to the laboratory floor. It was crushed like a ball of soft brown mud. It spattered.

"Now I guess they won't come back," Agnes said. "A pity to spoil all Dr. Whiting's work, though."

Larry was standing motionless, holding up his fist and looking at it oddly. "I smashed a planet! Think of it. I smashed a planet! Just the other—why it was just this evening, at the office, I was wishing for something to happen!"



THE RELUCTANT WEAPON

A live weapon is a downright liability ... it's all too apt to get qualms of conscience!

When the Zoz Horde passed destructively through this sector of the Galaxy, approximately a billion years ago, they suffered a minor loss. One of their weapons, Sentient Killer No. VT672, had an unexplained malfunction and was left behind to be repaired by the slave technicians who followed the Horde. However, the Zoz were met and annihilated by the Ghesh Empire, after which the masterless slaves dispersed to their home planets. The weapon, unrepaired, was left forgotten in the solar system it had failed to destroy.

Tresqu the Wisest, Ruler of Hova, Lord of the Universe, was being entertained by a troupe of Goefd dancers when his Lord of War, Wert, bounded into the Audience Hall. In his hurry to reach Tresqu's throne, Wert slipped on the nearly frictionless floor and skidded through the formation of dancers, sending the slender Goefden sprawling in all directions. He slid to a halt by the Pleading Mat, onto which he crawled and groveled, awaiting permission to speak.

"I believe three of the dancers received broken legs," Tresqu observed calmly. "They are rather delicate creatures and not at all clumsy." He dipped the tip of his tail into an urn of chilled perfume and gently dabbed it about his nostril. Speaking pleasantly, with long pauses between sentences, he kept his friendly gaze on the groveling Wert. "Oft I meditate on the clumsiness of our race in comparison to many others who are our graceful servants. Why, I wonder, cannot the rulers be graceful? Some of us are very clumsy indeed—too clumsy to live."

A tremor passed through Wert's stocky body.

"Possibly my Lord of War has news of sufficient import to excuse his ungainly haste. But I sincerely doubt it. I fear I must soon appoint a successor to him. Undoubtedly he has news of some sort. Blurt, Wert!"

"Your Majestic Wisdom," whined Wert, "my message is of utmost importance! The natives of Sol III have captured one of our decontaminator ships and learned its secrets!"

"Sol III?"

"Yes, Your Wisdom. The planet called Terra."

"Terra? You must realize, lordling, that I cannot occupy myself with remembering trivialities about individual worlds."

"Yes, Your Wisdom. We have a base, which is commanded by—that is, we *had* a base commanded—"

"Enough!" snapped Tresqu. "You start your tale from nowhere and wander whence and hence!" He raised his voice and called to one of his retainers. "Fool! Come forward!"

An abnormally slender Hovan arose from a platform off to Tresqu's left and skipped nimbly forward to stand insolently over the Lord of War, who was still prone on the Pleading Mat.

"Recite for me," said Tresqu, "the contents of my gazetteer on the planet Sol III. Listen well, Wert. You may even yet live long enough to profit by my Fool's style of declamation. Study it well. Also, you may raise your eyes sufficiently to observe the grace of his movements. Proceed, sprite."

"Sol III," began the Fool. "An H9 planet. Sol is in the Sirian Colony Sector, coordinates GL 15-44-17-5, GR 12 [to the power of 7] plus 9, D 14. Terra's life is normal animal-vegetable, with one intelligent species of hovoids called Humans. Due to the unpleasantly high oxygen content of the atmosphere, Terra has not been colonized, but has been placed under the control of the Science Ministry for the purpose of long-range psychological experiments." The Fool picked up Wert's tail and twisted it hard but absently as he talked. The Lord of War twitched painfully. "Many informative reports on the results of these experiments have been

released by the ministry during the past seven thousand years, dealing mainly with the Humans. The Science Ministry has declared Terra out of bounds—*Positively no visitors*."

With a single flow of motion, the Fool gave Wert's tail a final twist, leaped over his body, and bowed deeply to Tresqu.

"Beautifully done, Fool," applauded the Ruler of Hova. "Your mother claims me as your father, and there are times I am inclined to believe her. How would you like to be my Lord of War, Fool?"

"Verily, my good master," said the Fool, "I hope you consider me a Fool by title only."

"Well said, Fool. You are spared. Go seek your pleasures."

With another bow, the Fool backed away.

"Stand up, Wert," said Tresqu, "and tell me about this captured decontamination ship."

The Lord of War arose and managed to report with some smoothness. "Two years ago, the Science Ministry turned Terra over to my command, saying their long series of experiments was concluded. They recommended complete decontamination of the planet, since the Humans were developing technologies which could eventually threaten us. I dispatched a ship for that purpose immediately, but it failed to return. Also, reports from our base on Terra's satellite Luna ceased soon thereafter. A scouting expedition was sent. It has just reported the Luna base destroyed completely, and the decontaminator ship crashed and stripped of all important devices in one of the Terran deserts. By studying these removed devices, the Humans have undoubtedly developed protections against them.

"I humbly submit, Your Majestic Wisdom, that these events have endangered the safety of your glorious empire, and that drastic steps against the Humans should be taken immediately. Also, Good Lord of All, I submit that the Science Ministry, not the War Ministry, is at fault in this affair. They obviously let their experiments get out of control before calling us. Undoubtedly they would like to shift the full blame onto my shoulders."

Tresqu continued his pleasant demeanor. "There may be some truth in what you say, Wert. You overestimate the danger in this matter, I perceive. After all, what is one backward planet against the forces of my empire containing thirty-seven well-armed worlds? The Humans will be destroyed, even if they have the secrets of a decontaminator ship. As for the blame, which I admit is deplorable, the Lord of Science will be called to the Mat to make his excuses. Now, assuming you remain Lord of War, what action do you plan to take against the Humans?"

"Your Gracious Wisdom," faltered Wert, "I suggest we use the—the Weapon. You see, our forces are not fully mobilized at present for immediate action—"

"Full mobilization isn't necessary or even desirable," Tresqu interrupted with some impatience. "One task force can do the job. Ah! I see by your expression that you do not have even one task force in readiness."

"Your Gracious Wisdom," begged Wert, "you ordered a full holiday this month to celebrate the twenty-fourth an-

niversary of your magnificent reign, and—"

"Enough, Wert! Your tongue is as clumsy as your body." Tresqu nibbled thoughtfully at the tip of his tail. "We will use the Weapon," he decided. "In order to allow my court to continue their holiday, I'll assume direct command in this." He rose from his throne. "Musicians, summon my guards. I go to visit the Weapon. Come, Wert; come also, Fool. You will accompany me."

Shortly thereafter, Tresqu and his entourage boarded the royal cruiser and roared away from the City of Wisdom. The ship flew halfway around the planet and came to rest in a peaceful purple valley where insects shrilled contentedly and a small stream rippled. Tresqu climbed out onto the violet turf, his followers coming after him.

"Mighty Weapon of Zoz," he called, "I, Tresqu, seek your presence!"

"Oh, no!" groaned a slightly mechanical voice that seemed to come from no particular direction. "Will there never be peace, never a tranquil moment to soothe my spirit and erase the bloody stains of destruction recorded on my past?"

"That voice! It carries me away!" breathed the Fool. "Such a tragic tale of tormented strength is implicit in its very tone that I think I shall swoon!" But he wrapped his tail around the trunk of a nearby sapling for support and managed to retain consciousness.

"Me, too!" Wert chimed in with suspicious haste. "I'm quite moved!"

"Try not to counterfeit a soul you do not possess." Tresqu glowered at Wert. "You deceive no one."

The Fool was recovered sufficiently to hit the discomfited Lord of War with a pebble when Tresqu was not watching.

The Weapon had drifted into sight during this exchange, floating out of a shady hollow, as if blown by a breeze. It was very simple in appearance—an impalpable three-foot glowing sphere with a squat metallic cylinder at its base.

"Tell me not the purpose of your visit, petty lord!" It said. "It is known to me only too well. Ah, great First Principle! Little did I reck when, in ages past, I nursed your species to civilization, just how poorly you would serve my purpose. Peace it was I desired, but do I get it? No! Your kingdom is powerful, but you have not the strength to handle your own troubles. You rule twenty-nine planets..."

"Thirty-seven," corrected Tresqu politely.

"—thirty-seven planets, but when a malignant force appears on your borders, I, the Weapon, must be called upon to act in my own defense, and for the sake of a few more restful moments in this calm glade, I am obliged to destroy, yet it was to avoid destroying that I helped your species to empire in the old days."

"In truth," spoke the deeply sympathetic Tresqu, "yours is a sad story. I disturb your richly earned rest only after the sincerest soul-searching. But affairs of state are at cross purposes in a moment of crisis, and without your help Hova will be in danger."

"Ah, cruel Fate!" entoned the Weapon, "It aids me in no manner to protest against your inscrutable machinations! There is no turning aside, no avoid-

ance of necessity!" In a less declamatory style, the Weapon addressed Tresqu: "Very well, what is the trouble?"

Tresqu described the events on Terra for the Weapon, concluding, "Now that the Humans have knowledge of our space drive and armament, they are certain to attack, especially if they realize they have been subjects for experiment."

The Weapon flitted about restlessly along the bank of the brook. "I question the motives of my own thoughts. Do I quibble with myself in an attempt to escape unwelcome necessities? Tell, petty lord, do your scientists confirm the picture you paint of the Humans? Are they, like you, alas, masterfully vicious enough to destroy the peace of dozens of planets for nothing but revenge?"

"So the scientists say, mighty Weapon," answered Tresqu.

"You, Lord of War, why are you silent when your face is strained with words crying for expression?" asked the Weapon. "Speak your mind."

Wert squirmed. "If it please Your Mightiness, and you, Your Gracious Wisdom, I believe the Humans will know that we desire their destruction, and will try to defeat us for the sake of their own survival rather than revenge."

"A most convincing point, Lord of War," said the Weapon.

Tresqu flashed a forgiving smile at Wert while the Weapon paused before continuing:

"However, I fear my unwilling spirit refuses to bow to the most reasonable of arguments. Please leave me; solve the problem yourselves!"

Tresqu bowed and moved toward the cruiser. "We obey, Mighty Guide of our fathers. Let me say in parting that I, too, am grieved by our talk, much more because of the pain our visit has caused your noble greatness than because our race is threatened with annihilation. My deepest hope is that the ravages of war will never reach this peaceful place which is so dear to your gentle being."

"Wait!" groaned the Weapon. "To slay, or not to slay, that is the dilemma. Ah, had my old masters of Zoz only left within my powers the seed of my own destruction, I would gladly seek the consummation of ultimate peace. But, no, that door is closed to me by deathless locks. Bring me a Human, that I may learn to hate him. Choose the most ignoble specimen available. I will converse with him at length so as to become exasperated with all the despicable traits of his race. Then, in my contempt for those traits, I will be able to cleanse the Universe of all Humans."

Tresqu turned quickly to his Fool. "Are there any Humans on Hova?"

"Yes, in the biological research laboratories."

"Then go quickly, Fool, and fetch one. This is a grave matter, and I trust you to choose the most monstrous specimen available. Hurry!"

The Fool ran into the cruiser and was on his way, leaving Tresqu, Wert, and several guardsmen with the Weapon. If the Weapon was conscious of the fact that the Lord of Hova was staying behind out of courtesy, it did not show it. Instead, it wandered indifferently away, mumbling a soliloquy of guilt and misery.

The sight of the Fool's specimen of humanity repaid Tresqu for the tedious-

ness of the waiting. It was a particularly sordid-looking creature with a dirty growth of hairs on its head and face. Its body, thin as the Fool's, but with no compensating grace of movement, was clad in a blue garment of roughly woven vegetable fibers, and the extremities of its nether limbs were enclosed in evil-smelling boxes of animal hide. Its fierce eyes darted ominously from one Hovan to another. Its jaw kept working in a slow rhythm, and occasionally a stream of black liquid exploded through its mouth.

"You have done well, Fool," said Tresqu. "You will be rewarded highly." Raising his voice he called, "Mighty Weapon, your specimen awaits!"

"I come!" Once more the Weapon floated into view.

The Earthman's jaw sagged. "'Y God!" he muttered in English, staring at the approaching Weapon.

"Indeed," said the Weapon, "this appears to be a creature I could learn to abhor and kill. If only its thoughts equal its appearance—Speak, Human!"

The man said nothing.

"Mighty Weapon," murmured the Fool, "this Human is truly an ignoble monster. He has been in captivity for five years and has yet to speak a word of our beautiful language instead of his own barbaric tongue."

"You fool!" shouted Tresqu. "How is the Weapon going to converse with him? Why did you bring one that cannot talk?"

Not in the least disconcerted, the Fool replied, "As you ordered, good master, I brought the worst specimen available. However, the possibility of linguistic difficulties was not overlooked. I have here a dictionary of his language, recently compiled by our Alien Affairs staff." He produced a large volume of manuscript from beneath his cloak.

"Your Fool shows wisdom, petty lord," spoke the Weapon. "I will study this book. Know the language, know the people, it is wisely said. In fact, I originated that saying myself some three thousand years ago, I believe. Unship any supplies brought for the Human and begone. Three days will suffice for the arousal of my wrath. Return then."

"As you wish, O Mightiest of All." Tresqu bowed gawkily. "It is my most ardent desire, Wondrous Guide, that we, your servants, will not be obliged to disturb your peace again for a thousand centuries, once this affair is concluded."

"And mine," the Weapon snapped crossly. "Now leave me."

The man watched the Hovans enter their cruiser and fly away. Looking at the Weapon hovering nearby, he squatted on his heels and pulled up a blade of purple grass to chew. Minutes passed in silence. Then the Weapon moved away, the book bobbing along behind, supported by some unseen force.

When it was out of sight, the man muttered, "'Y God, I've saw fireballs in my time, but that's the first one I ever saw settin' in a bucket!"

After a thoughtful examination of his surroundings, the man stood up and walked to the packing cases the Hovans had left. All but one contained the synthetic food product to which he had grown accustomed in his five years of captivity. The other box, rather small, contained a shredded vegetable which served him as a poor substitute for chew-

ing tobacco. Purple when growing, the leaves of this vegetable were blue-black when cured, making his frequent expectorations look like ink.

"Filthy damn stuff!" he grunted, stuffing several handfuls in an empty overall pocket.

He shuffled down to the brook and tested its temperature with a hand. Finding it rather cold, he decided against taking a bath. Instead, he spat into it and watched meditatively as the spot of black was carried downstream. "I wonder what they turned me loose for," he monologued.

Careful to avoid the spot where the Weapon appeared to have gone, he returned to the food supply and ate. By then it was getting dark, and he bedded down for the night on some thick grass under a tree.

"'Y God," he yawned, "I'm glad all these insects don't want nothin' to do with me."

The Weapon was waiting beside him when he woke up next morning. "Eyes of your Terran Deity," it said, "I shall now converse with you in your own tongue. Name yourself, creature!"

The man sat up startled. A moment passed before he said, "I'm Jake—Jacob Absher. What was that you said?"

"My pronunciation is above reproach, Jacob. Therefore I will not repeat myself. Attend me closely or I shall punish you."

"'Y God, I heard you all right and you didn't make sense!" said Jacob, determined not to be frightened. "Now if you aim to talk with me, stop imitatin' a professor and talk so's a man can understand you. I ain't scared of you, so leave off makin' threats!"

"Such stupid insolence!" gloated the Weapon. "Already I feel my wrath growing within me! Since it will anger me even more to explain my words to you, I will do exactly that. My first words to you were, 'Eyes of your Terran Deity,' an expression you use frequently in a corrupted form to begin your statements. By studying your language, I learned that 'Zounds' is a similar corruption referring to the wounds of the Deity, while 'Strewth' refers to your God's truth. Thus, I was able to understand, and state in uncorrupted form, your remark, 'Eye God.'"

"'Tain't what it means," objected Jacob, filling his mouth with ersatz tobacco. "It just means *by* God."

The Weapon considered this. "And exactly what is the significance of such a remark?"

Jacob scratched his whiskered chin. "I reckon you got me there. I guess it means that I mean what I say."

"In other words, any statement you make following that phrase is to be taken seriously?"

"Somethin' like that."

"Then it follows that your other statements, without the 'by God' preface, are not seriously intended. Are they jokes or lies?"

"That ain't the way it is at all! I just say 'by God' when I feel like it, not every time I'm bein' serious."

"Monstrous inconsistency!" groaned the Weapon dramatically. "Ah, chaotic universe! Is there then no sublime plan, no fateful development to your endless succession of days? How could even the

most synoptic First Principle find a purpose for creating such an unplanned, unreasonable species as the Humans? Can it be—unhappy thought!—that there is no plan to it all, and we exist for naught?"

Jacob listened with open mouth. "Say," he broke in, "are you some kind of play-actor?"

"That is what I ask myself," the Weapon continued its oratorical flight. "Are we all actors, speaking the lines written for us by a Great Playwright who plans to unite all the threads of his plot in a universal climax to come? Or are we poor random creatures without purpose?" It paused and added in a more conversational tone, "But that is not what you mean by your question. No, I am not a play-actor. I am an unfortunate weapon, reluctant to employ myself for my intended purpose of destruction of life and unsuited by my structure for the doing of deeds more worthy in nature."

Jacob squinted about. "A weapon, huh? Let's see you hit that bird thing sittin' in that tree over there."

"Bloodthirsty fiend! I do not kill for amusement!"

"I just wanted to see how you worked," said the abashed Jacob. "All I've seen you do is float around and talk a blue streak. As far as I'm concerned, you ain't nothin' but a big-mouthed bluff."

"Very well, Jacob. If you have formed such an erroneous attitude, it will be necessary for me to correct you immediately. Observe the red boulder on yonder hill."

"I see it."

The cylindrical base of the Weapon swung to point briefly at the boulder, which quietly crumbled to dust.

"I be dog!" yelped Jacob. He looked at the Weapon with respect. "You sure pulverized it! How do you work?"

"You could not understand the processes involved. Suffice it to say I have the means to collect energy in general and retransmit it in specific forms and directions. But enough of this. You are here to answer questions, not ask them. First, tell me what you did in an average day on Terra."

"That what you call the world I live on?"

"Yes."

"I'm a farmer, you know. I got a place in the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. First thing in the mornin', I'd go feed the livestock while Suzy cooked breakfast." A faraway look came into Jacob's eyes. "Guess she took the kids and went to live with her mammy when these here animals grabbed me...."

"Continue," commanded the Weapon.

"Huh? Well, then we'd eat breakfast. Come to think of it, I ain't et yet this mornin'." Jacob got up and went to get himself some breakfast.

"But this matter—" protested the Weapon.

"Not on an empty stomach," Jacob said calmly, eating without haste.

When he returned, the Weapon questioned him further about his life on Terra. Hours of ill-tempered conversation passed.

"Such drabness!" the Weapon finally exclaimed. "Creatures who lead such dull lives as yours should welcome extinction. Not once have you mentioned an

appreciation of the wondrous exaltation that comes from an esthetic feel for beauty. With the labor of providing for your grotesque body's animal cravings is your whole life spent. Not in anger, but as an act of mercy, can I exterminate your defective race!"

Jacob's mouth hung open. "So *that's* what your monkey's brung me out here for—fixin' to kill us! 'Y God, you better look out! We got atom bombs on Earth an' we'll use 'em on you if you try anything!"

"Toys!" sneered the Weapon. "Be assured, Jacob, that I have nothing to fear from any childish mechanisms your Terrans can contrive!"

Jacob sat stunned. "But you said a minute ago you couldn't kill nothin'!"

"I can kill only when I'm convinced it is best for my own repose or for the health of the Universe. Long ago, I could go forth at battle with thoughtless joy at the command of my masters of Zoz, but now I must have reasons, must converse at length with my aberrated emotions, must prepare myself as for an ordeal."

"Them Zozes must've been the Devil's minions," argued Jacob. "The Commandments says, 'Thou shalt not kill' and when you go against that, you're goin' against the word of God."

"Poor, futile creature!" sympathized the Weapon. "You actually strive to pit your naive superstitious mind against my highly developed mentality in argument. You actually associate my supreme masters of old with your puny mythological villain! Lowliness should know its place. But I feel no anger—merely a pitying desire to relieve your kind of the burden of living."

Silently, Jacob replenished the wad of "tobacco" in his mouth. After chewing a while, he spat and said dolefully, "I don't reckon there's nothin' I can say or do that you won't hold against me. I always heard tell the Devil can twist anything to suit hisself, and I reckon his minions can do the same thing. An' that's what you are: the Devil's minion! I reckon you break every Commandment God give us. Except about committin' adultery. I don't guess you can do that."

"Your piddling reproductive customs have no application on my plane of existence. Cannot you comprehend that you are less to me than a microbe? Even my servants, the Hovans, do not concern themselves with such ignoble concepts as what you call adultery!"

"You mean they live in sin?" asked Jacob.

"They mate as often as they please with anyone they please," the Weapon replied coldly. "I will ignore the ludicrous implications of your absurd moral concepts."

"I don't mean to criticize your animal friends," glowered Jacob. "I reckon they ain't children of God, so it don't matter if they *do* mate like a pack of dogs. They probably ain't got no souls to keep pure. It looked to me like they worshiped you like a false god, too."

"They ... O Great Hidden Manifestation!" squalled the Weapon in rage. "They regard me as their guide and mentor. Nothing more. I would not allow anything else."

Jacob watched the Weapon in awe. The energy globe was flickering and flaring wildly in an uncontrolled display of color. "'Y God!" he exclaimed. "You sure

are puttin' on a fireworks show!"

The globe settled down to a tensely nervous fluctuation which hurt Jacob's eyes to watch. "Never in the ageless span of my existence," quavered the Weapon angrily, "have I been insulted in such vulgar terms by any creature. And now from *you*, creature whom my glorious masters of Zoz would exterminate like a buzzing fly, like a disease germ, I hear these senseless mouthings of defamation! Stop it or I shall destroy you outright!"

The Weapon's fluctuating, along with its loud, grating voice, put Jacob's nerves on edge. He growled, "I bet your old Zozes live in adultery just like your animal friends."

The color of the energy globe sank to dull red and the Weapon emitted a series of buzzing, inarticulate noises.

"It suits not my nature, bit of diseased scum, to slay you in a fit of indignation," it finally said with tightly controlled fury. "You are beneath such individual recognition. Yet it is fortunate for you that your insults have no basis in reality, otherwise my intellect could not have claimed ascendancy over the immediate urges of my tortured sense of extreme disgust. Be wise, say I, knowing I request the impossible, and irk me no more!"

"'Y God, I reckon you don't think you rile me up, too, with all that high falutin' jabber of yours!" Jacob snapped back.

"As I speak, so speak the mighty Zoz," replied the Weapon in high dignity. "They are great and noble beings, given to poetic flights and magnificent deeds. To them, your puny opinions would not even be recognized as thought."

"If they talk in that puttin'-on, playactin' way you do, they are a bunch of phony show-offin' hypocrites!" sulked Jacob.

Several things happened too quickly for Jacob to follow. The color of the energy globe dropped to absolute black. The metallic cylinder swung up to point at Jacob. A thin ringing "*Ping!*" sounded in the cylinder. A killing wave of pure hate struck Jacob.

He had just enough time to know he was a dead man before he blacked out.

It came as a surprise, when Jacob regained consciousness, to find that he was stretched out on purple grass with the Weapon still hovering over him.

"You missed, 'y God!" he mumbled, sitting up.

"I regained my sanity in time, Master Technician," the Weapon replied pleasantly.

"Huh?"

"Ah, day of un-containable joy!" sang the Weapon, flaming pure white. "Day of glorious release to continue the grandeur of old! As the past eons of futility passed over me, I sank to the conclusion that I was forever condemned to my useless existence on this planet, with nothing to sustain my spirit other than the sense of beauty given me by masters to fill my leisure hours! But now, Master Technician Jacob, you have found me and corrected my malfunction, long after I had surrendered all hope!"

Still dazed by the nearly fatal wave of mental energy the Weapon had directed at him, Jacob could not understand what had happened. Instead of talking contemptuously to him, the Weapon was now

addressing him as Master Something-or-other, and....

"What did you say I done?" he asked.

"You corrected my malfunction," repeated the Weapon. "That is to say, you purged my mechanism of the inhibition against joyful slaughter that has plagued me for a billion years. Ah, you are a clever Technician, Jacob! But I comprehend it all now. By arousing within me an overwhelming emotional desire to kill—a singularly strange feeling!—you depressed my inhibition to the releasing point. So telling was your masterful therapy that I almost ceased functioning at all!

"Your own life was in dire danger for the moment required for my new-found sanity to assume control. But, of course, all slaves of the glorious Zoz die willingly when the work of the masters so demands."

"Now wait a minute!" objected Jacob. "I ain't no slave of your Zozes or no Technician either! You know what I am—a good God-fearin' human!" His voice dropped to a pleading mumble. "And may God forgive me if I've got myself in league with the Devil!"

"Ah? Could it be?" murmured the Weapon. "Could indeed your infuriating insults of the Great Ones have been honest expressions of a puny mind with no therapeutic intentions? I answer: Yes. The possible occurrence of specific incidents in the inclusion of space-time is curiously unlimited. But you have served me, Jacob, and have earned the privilege of continuing your meager, momentary life. Besides, I can use you further."

"You can, huh?" Jacob said slyly. "Look here, Weapon, I'll make a bargain with you."

"Ha! Stupid, untutored slave!" chuckled the Weapon. "Learn that yours is to obey, not to bargain. But yet, state your price for my amusement, now that I can no longer be enraged by your words."

"Well, you let the rest of the people on Earth alone and I'll do whatever you want me to."

After a pause, the Weapon quoted, "'Nobility shows its traces in surprising places.' You do not sufficiently comprehend my nature, Technician Slave Jacob. I am a Weapon. My masters point me, as you would point a rifle, and command that I destroy. I kill at their direction, but seldom otherwise. Thus, your Terra is safe until another Weapon or I am aimed and directed. You can make no bargain."

Jacob thought this over. While doing so, the Weapon drifted away.

"Wait here, slave," it said in parting. "I go to meditate on my recovered sanity."

During the next two days, Jacob caught an occasional glimpse of the Weapon drifting thoughtfully around in the depths of the forest, but they did not meet for conversation. Jacob amused himself by rigging a fishing line out of some of the packaging material that contained his food. He even succeeded in catching a fish, but its queer odor discouraged him from trying to cook and eat it.

Then the royal cruiser of Tresqu the Wisest dropped into the meadow. Its airlock swung open and the Ruler of Hova, followed by his entourage, came out.

"Oh, Mighty Weapon!" bawled

Tresqu. "Your loving servant craves audience!"

"Ah, you have returned, petty lord," said the Weapon, drifting out from among the trees. "Serve me by calling all the crew members from your noble ship, that I may view you all together."

Puzzled, Tresqu bowed and said, "Your least whim is law, Mighty Weapon." He turned and called, "All hands, outside!"

A half-dozen Hovans tumbled through the lock to stand in line behind the ruler's entourage.

"Is this all of them?" asked the Weapon.

"All, Great Mentor of—"

The Weapon laughed and the Hovans fell dead.

"Come, Slave Jacob," commanded the Weapon. "We take this cruiser."

Dazed and slack-faced, Jacob came out from behind a bush, where he had hidden himself from the Hovans, and followed the Weapon through the airlock.

"Even in my insanity, I planned well," said the Weapon. "These ships, which I taught the Hovans to construct, can be operated simply, even by such as you. Attend my instructions."

First, the Weapon taught Jacob to open and close the airlock. Then he was shown how to fuel the engines, upon which the Weapon made some changes to improve their performance. Finally, in the control room, Jacob learned to fly the ship.

This took several hours, at the end of which time Jacob had succeeded in raising the cruiser into a satellite orbit around Hova.

"Do you comprehend, Slave?" asked the Weapon.

"Sure. This thing ain't nothin' to run compared to a T-model Ford! Which way is it to Earth?"

"That I shall not tell you, Jacob, because I must leave the ship for a few hours and desire to find you here when I return. Consider and tell me: Will you be here?"

Jacob gazed at the broad, star-spangled viewplate that curved around his seat at the controls. There was, he reflected an awful lot of nothing out there for a man to get lost in.

"I'll be here," he promised.

"Very good. You must understand that these controls are constructed for manipulation by such limbs as your own and those of the Hovans. Thus, it is convenient for me to use you as a pilot instead of doing the drab, mechanical task with my ill-suited force-field manipulators. You will be wise to serve me well, Jacob."

Jacob nodded. "You got a point there."

"Operate the lock for me," the Weapon ordered.

Jacob did so and watched the colorful machine drift out of sight in the atmosphere below the cruiser.

Minutes ticked quietly by as Jacob gazed down at the purple planet and wondered why the Weapon had not chosen a trained Hovan pilot instead of him. Also, he wondered how soon the Weapon would take him home to Earth.

A great swath of the purple planet began turning black. The black dulled to the gray shade of ashes as the swath grew longer. Over the surface of Hova, the

blackening moved like some colossal paint brush. Dense clouds of smoke rolled upward to the high reaches of the atmosphere.

Jacob realized why the Weapon had not selected a Hovan pilot.

When all of Hova was a lifeless ball in a fog of ash, the Weapon returned.

"Ah, good Jacob!" it boomed jovially. "Let us be up and doing! Thirty-six planets remain to be visited before my current assignment is concluded!"

"Do all of them get—that?" asked Jacob, nodding toward the lifeless world below.

"Yes. I was instructed to render this solar system lifeless before I malfunctioned. Since then, the life of this system has spread, with my insane aid, to infest other systems. Of course, my task must now include all those new Hovan worlds."

"Now wait a minute!" said Jacob in terror. "I can't let you do that!"

"They are your enemies, Jacob," reminded the Weapon. "They meant to kill every human on Terra. Also, by your own words, they are soulless animals who live in sinful adultery. Ha! It amuses me to reason with you, Slave Jacob!"

"Godamighty, forgive me!" prayed Jacob, in horrified defeat.

The Weapon seemed to know how to find the Hovan planets from the markings of the cruiser's star charts. Jacob could not read the charts and saw no hope of getting back to earth and Suzy and the kids without the Weapon's help. Dully, he went about the tasks the Weapon ordered him to do.

Several weeks passed as one world after another was left a smoking ruin.

Finally the job was done.

"*Now*, can I go home?" begged Jacob.

"To Terra? No, Slave. I still need a pilot."

"But if you take me home," Jacob continued desperately, "you can get a better pilot than me. I'm just a dirt farmer. There's all kinds of airplane pilots on Earth, youngsters without families who would give their right arms to fly this thing, I bet!"

"Ah?" The Weapon considered. "A willing slave is, of course, always desirable. On the other hand, Terra is up in arms against the empire of Hova, not realizing it is dead. They would destroy this craft on sight, and I would be obliged to wait around until they could construct another for me. No, I have decided we will not go to Terra."

"But, damn it, where else is there to go?"

"In search of my masters of Zoz," replied the Weapon. "Naturally, I wish to return myself to their services as soon as possible."

"But they might be anywhere!"

"True," the Weapon agreed. "But even after a billion years, I know of several places in the Universe they may be near. Their great cleansing sweeps tend to circle and turn in a pattern established long in advance. Thus we will go to those places where they may now be engaged in their consecrated task of universal purification."

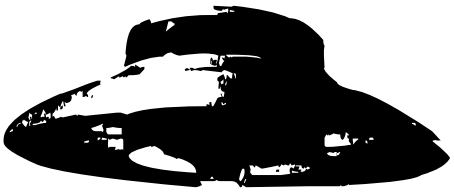
"But—"

"No more, Slave! We go!"

Out of the Milky Way, the cruiser hurtled at a speed which a sentient

lightwave would find meaningless. On and on they journeyed in quest of the long-dead Zoz Horde.

They may still be going.



THE RETURN

1

Altamont cast a quick, routine glance at the instrument panels and then looked down through the transparent nose of the helicopter at the yellow-brown river five hundred feet below. Next he scraped the last morsel from his plate and ate it.

"What did you make this out of, Jim?" he asked. "I hope you kept notes while you were concocting it. It's good."

"The two smoked pork chops left over from yesterday evening," Loudons said, "and that bowl of rice that's been taking up space in the refrigerator the last couple of days, together with a little egg powder and some milk. I ground the chops up and mixed them with the rice and other stuff. Then added some bacon, to make grease to fry it in."

Altamont chuckled. That was Loudons, all right: he could take a few left-overs, mess them together, pop them in the skillet, and have a meal that would turn the chef back at the Fort green with envy. He filled his cup and offered the pot.

"Caffchoc?" he asked.

Loudons held his cup out to be filled, blew on it, sipped, and then hunted on the ledge under the desk for the butt of the cigar he had half-smoked the evening before.

"Did you ever drink coffee, Monty?" the socio-psychologist asked, getting the cigar drawing to his taste.

"Coffee? No. I've read about it, of course. We'll have to organize an expedition to Brazil, sometime, to get seeds and try raising some."

Loudons blew a smoke ring toward the rear of the cabin.

"A much overrated beverage," he replied. "We found some, once, when I was on that expedition into Idaho, in what must have been the stockroom of a hotel. Vacuum-packed in moisture-proof containers, and free from radioactivity. It wasn't nearly as good as caffchoc.

"But then, I suppose, a pre-bustup coffee drinker couldn't stomach this stuff we're drinking."

Loudons looked forward, up the river they were following. "Get anything on the radio?" he asked. "I noticed you took us up to about ten thousand, while I was shaving."

Altamont got out his pipe and tobacco pouch, filling the former slowly and carefully.

"Not a whisper. I tried Colony Three, in the Ozarks, and I tried to call in that tribe of workers in Louisiana. I couldn't get either."

"Maybe if we tried to get a little more power on the set...."

That was Loudons, too, Altamont thought. There wasn't a better man at the Fort, when it came to dealing with people. But confront him with a problem about things and he was lost.

That was one of the reasons why he

and the stocky, phlegmatic social scientist made such a good team, he thought. As far as he, himself, was concerned, people were just a mysterious, exasperatingly unpredictable order of things which were subject to no known natural laws.

And Loudons thought the same thing about machines: he couldn't psychoanalyze them.

Altamont gestured with his pipe toward the nuclear-electric conversion unit, between the control-cabin and the living quarters in the rear of the boxcar-sized helicopter.

"We have enough power back there to keep this windmill in the air twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, for the next fifteen years," he said. "We just don't have enough radio. If I'd step up the power on this set any more, it'd burn out before I could say, 'Altamont calling Fort Ridgeway.'"

"How far are we from Pittsburgh now?" Loudons wanted to know.

Altamont looked across the cabin at the big map of the United States as they had been, the red and green and blue and yellow patchwork of vanished political divisions. The colors gleamed through the transparent overlay on which this voyage of re-discovery was plotted.

The red line of their journey started at Fort Ridgeway, in what had been Arizona. It angled east by a little north, to Colony Three, in northern Arkansas ... sharply northeast to St. Louis and its lifeless ruins ... then to Chicago and Gary, where little bands of Stone Age reversions stalked and fought and ate each other ... Detroit, where things that had completely forgotten they were human emerged from their burrows only at night ... Cleveland, where a couple of cobalt bombs must have landed in the lake and drenched everything with radioactivity that still lingered after two centuries ... Akron, where vegetation was only beginning to break through the glassy slag ... Cincinnati, where they had last stopped....

"How's the leg this morning, Jim?" he asked.

"Little stiff. Doesn't hurt much, though."

"Why, we're about fifty miles, as we follow that river, and that's relatively straight." He looked down through the transparent nose of the copter at a town, now choked with trees that grew among the tumbled walls. "I think that's Aliquippa."

Loudons looked and shrugged, then looked again and pointed.

"There's a bear. Just ducked into that church or movie theater or whatever. I wonder what he thinks we are."

Altamont puffed slowly at his pipe. "I wonder if we're going to find anything at all in Pittsburgh."

"You mean people, as distinct from those biped beasts we've found so far? I doubt it," Loudons replied, finishing his caffchoc and wiping his mustache with the back of his hand. "I think the whole eastern half of the country is nothing but forest like this, and the highest type of life is just about three cuts below Homo Neanderthalensis, almost impossible to contact, and even more impossible to educate."

"I wasn't thinking about that. I've just

about given up hope of finding anybody or even a reasonably high level of barbarism," Altamont said. "I was thinking about that cache of microfilmed books that was buried at the Carnegie Library."

"If it was buried," Loudons qualified. "All we have is that article in that two-century-old copy of Time about how the people at the library had constructed the crypt and were beginning the microfilming. We don't know if they ever had a chance to get it finished, before the rockets started landing."

They passed over a dam of flotsam that had banked up at a wrecked bridge and accumulated enough mass to resist the periodic floods that had kept the river usually clear. Three human figures fled across a sand-flat at one end of it and disappeared into the woods. Two of them carried spears tipped with something that sparkled in the sunlight, probably shards of glass.

"You know, Monty, I get nightmares, sometimes, thinking about what things must be like in Europe," Loudons said.

Five or six wild cows went crashing through the brush below. Altamont nodded when he saw them.

"Maybe tomorrow, we'll let down and shoot a cow," he said. "I was looking in the freeze-locker and the fresh meat's getting a little low. Or a wild pig, if we find a good stand of oak trees. I could enjoy what you'd do with some acorn-fed pork."

He looked across the table. "Finished?" he asked Loudons. "Take over, then. I'll go back and wash the dishes."

They rose, and Loudons, favoring his left leg, moved over to the seat at the controls.

Altamont gathered up the two cups, the stainless-steel dishes, and the knives and the forks and spoons, going up the steps over the shielded converter and ducking his head to avoid the seat in the forward top machine-gun turret. He washed and dried the dishes, noting with satisfaction that the gauge of the water tank was still reasonably high, and glanced out one of the windows. Loudons was taking the big helicopter upstairs, for a better view.

Now and then, among the trees, there would be a glint of glassy slag, usually in a fairly small circle. That was to be expected: beside the three or four H-bombs that had fallen on the Pittsburgh area, mentioned in the transcripts of the last news to reach the Fort from the outside, the whole district had been pelted, more or less at random, with fission bombs.

West of the confluence of the Allegheny and the Monongahela, it would probably be worse than this.

"Can you see Pittsburgh yet, Jim?" he called out.

"Yes, it's a mess! Worse than Gary, worse than Akron even."

"Monty! Come here! I think I have something!"

Picking up the pipe he had laid down, Altamont hurried forward, dodging his six-foot length under the gun turret and swinging down from the walkway over the converter.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Smoke. A lot of smoke, twenty or thirty fires at the very least."

Loudons had shifted from Forward to Hover and was peering through a pair of

binoculars. "See that island, the long one? Across the river from it, on the north side, toward this end. Yes, by Einstein! And I can see cleared ground, and what I think are houses, inside a stockade...."

2

Murray Hughes walked around the corner of the cabin into the morning sunlight, lacing his trousers, with his hunting shirt thrown over his bare shoulders. He found, without much surprise, that his father had also slept late. Verner Hughes was just beginning to shave.

Inside the kitchen, his mother and the girls were clattering pots and skillets.

Outside the kitchen door, his younger brother, Hector, was noisily chopping wood.

Going through the door, he filled another of the light-metal basins with hot water, found his razor, and went outside again, setting the basin on the bench.

Most of the ware in the Hughes cabin was of light-metal. Murray and his father had mined it in the dead city up the river, from a place where it had floated to the top of a puddle of slag, back when the city had been blasted, at the end of the hard times.

It had been hard work, but the stuff had been easy to carry down to where they had hidden their boat. And, for once, they'd had no trouble with the Scowrers.

Too bad they couldn't say as much for yesterday's hunting trip!

As he rubbed lather into the stubble on his face, he cursed with irritation. That had been a bad-luck hunt, all around.

They had gone out before dawn, hunting into the hills to the north. They'd spent the day at it, and shot one small wild pig. Lucky it was small, at that. They'd have had to abandon a full-grown one, after the Scowrers had began hunting them. Six of them, as big a band as he'd ever seen together at one time, had managed to cut them off from the stockade. He and his father had been forced to circle miles out of their way.

His father had shot one, and he'd had to leave his hatchet sticking in the skull of another, when his rifle had misfired.

That meant a trip to the gunsmith's, for a new hatchet and to have the mainspring of the rifle replaced. Nobody could afford to have a rifle that couldn't be trusted, least of all a hunter and prospector.

On top of everything else, he had had a few words with Alex Barrett, the gunsmith, the other day.

Well, at least that could be smoothed over. Barrett would be glad to do business with him, once the gunsmith saw that hard tool-steel he had dug out of that place down the river. Hardest steel either he or his father had ever found, and it hadn't been atom-spoiled, either.

He cleaned, wiped and stropped his razor and put it back in the case. He threw out the wash-water on the compost pile and went into the cabin, putting on his shirt and his belt. Then he passed through to the front porch, where his father was already eating at the table.

The people of the Toon like to eat in the open. It was something they'd always done, just as they'd always like to eat together in the evenings.

He sweetened his cup of chicory with a lump of maple sugar and began to sip it before he sat down, standing with one

foot on the bench and looking down across the parade ground, past the Aitch-Cue House, toward the river and the wall.

"If you're coming around to Alex's way of thinking—and mine—it won't hurt you to admit it, son," his father said.

Murray turned, looking at his father with the beginning of anger, and then he grinned. The elders were constantly keeping the young men alert with these tests. He checked back over his actions since he had come out onto the porch.

... to the table, sugar in his chicory, one foot on the bench ... which had reminded him again of the absence of the hatchet from his belt and brought an automatic frown ... then the glance toward the gunsmith's shop, and across the parade ground ... the glance including the houses into which so much labor had gone, the wall that had been built from rubble and topped with pointed stakes, the white slabs of marble that marked the graves of the First Tenant and the men of the Old Toon....

He had thought, at that moment, that maybe his father and Alex Barrett and Reader Rawson and Tenant Mycroft Jones and the others were right: there were too many things here that could not be moved along with them, if they decided to move.

It would be false modesty, refusal to see things as they were, not to admit that he was the leader of the younger men, and the boys of the Irregulars. He had been forced to face the responsibilities of that fact since last winter.

Then, the usual theological arguments about the proper order of the Sacred Books and the true nature of the Risen One had been replaced by a violent controversy when Sholto Jiminez and Birdy Edwards had reopened the old question of the advisability of moving the Toon and settling elsewhere.

He had been in favor of the idea himself and found that the other young men had followed his lead. But, for the last month or so, he had begun to doubt the wisdom of it.

It was probably reluctance to admit this to himself that had brought on the strained feelings between himself and his old friend, the gunsmith.

"I'll have to drill the Irregulars, today," he said. "Birdy Edwards has been drilling them while we've been hunting. But I'll go up and see Alex about a new hatchet and fixing my rifle. I'll have a talk with him."

He stepped forward to the edge of the porch, still munching on a honey-dipped piece of cornbread, and glanced up at the sky. That was a queer bird; he had never seen a bird with a wing action like that.

Then he realized that the object was not a bird at all.

His father was staring at it, too.

"Murray! That's ... that's like the old stories from the time of the wars!"

But Murray was already racing across the parade ground toward the Aitch-Cue House, where the big iron ring hung by its chain from a gallows-like post, with a hammer beside it.

3

The stockaded village became larger, details grew plainer, as the helicopter came slanting down and began spiraling around it.

It was a fairly big place, some forty or fifty acres in a rough parallelogram,

surrounded by a wall of varicolored stone and brick and concrete rubble from old ruins, topped with a palisade of pointed poles. There was a small jetty projecting into the river, to which six or eight boats of different sorts were tied; a gate opened onto this from the wall.

Inside the stockade, there were close to a hundred buildings, ranging from small cabins to a structure with a belfry. It seemed to have been a church, partly ruined in the war of two centuries ago and later rebuilt.

A stream came down from the woods, across the cultivated land around the fortified village. There was a rough flume which carried the water from a dam close to the edge of the forest and provided a fall to turn a mill wheel.

"Look, strip farming," Loudons pointed. "See the alternate strips of grass and plowed ground. These people understand soil conservation.

"They have horses, too."

As he spoke, three riders left the village at a gallop. They separated, and the people in the fields, who had all started for the village, turned and began hurrying toward the woods. Two of the riders headed for a pasture in which cattle had been grazing and started herding them also into the woods.

For a while, there was a scurrying of little figures in the village below. Then, not a moving thing was in sight.

"There's good organization," Loudons said. "Everybody seems to know what to do, and how to get it done promptly. And look how neat the whole place is. Policed up. I'll bet anything we'll find that they have a military organization, or a military tradition at least.

"We'll have a lot to find out: you can't understand a people until you understand their background and their social organization."

"Humph. Let me have a look at their artifacts: that will tell what kind of people they are," Altamont said, swinging the glasses back and forth over the enclosure. "Water-power mill, water-power sawmill—building on the left side of the water wheel, see the pile of fresh lumber beside it. Blacksmith shop, and from that chimney, I'd say a small foundry, too.

"Wonder what that little building out on the tip of the island is, it has a water wheel too. Undershot wheel, and it looks like it could be raised or lowered. Now, I wonder...."

"Monty, I think we ought to land right in the middle of the enclosure, on that open plaza thing, in front of the building that looks like a reconditioned church. That's probably the Royal Palace, or the Pentagon, or the Kremlin, or whatever."

Altamont started to object, paused, and then nodded. "I think you're right, Jim. From the way they scattered, and got their livestock into the woods, they probably expect us to bomb them. We have to get inside and that's the quickest way to do it." He thought for a moment. "We'd better be armed, when we go out. Pistols, auto-carbines, and a few of those concussion-grenades in case we have to break up a concerted attack. I'll get them."

The plaza, the houses and the cabins around it, the two-hundred-year-old church, all were silent and apparently lifeless as they set the helicopter down. Once Loudons caught a movement inside the door of a house, and saw a metallic

glint.

"There's a gun up there," he said. "Looks like a four-pounder. Brass. I knew that smith-shop was also a foundry. See that little curl of smoke? That's the gunner's slow-match.

"I'd thought maybe that thing on the island was a powder mill. That would be where they'd put it. Probably extract their niter from the dung of their horses and cows. Sulfur probably from coal-mine drainage.

"Jim, this is really something!"

"I hope they don't cut loose with that thing," Loudons said, looking apprehensively at the brass-rimmed black muzzle that was covering them from the belfry. "I wonder if we ought to—Oh-oh, here they come!"

Three or four young men stepped out of the wide door of the old church. They wore fringed buckskin trousers and buckskin shirts and odd caps of deerskin with visors to shade the eyes and similar beaks behind to protect the neck. They had powder horns and bullet pouches slung over their shoulders, and long rifles in their hands. They stepped aside as soon as they were out. Carefully avoiding any gesture of menace, they simply stood, watching the helicopter which had landed in their village.

Three other men followed them out. They, too, wore buckskins and the odd double-visored caps. One had a close-cropped white beard, and on the shoulders of his buckskin shirt, he wore the single silver bars of a first lieutenant of the vanished United States Army. He had a pistol on his belt. The pistol had the saw-handle grip of an automatic, but it was a flintlock, as were the rifles of the young men who stood so watchfully on either side of the door.

Two middle-aged men accompanied the bearded man and the trio advanced toward the helicopter.

"All right, come on, Monty."

Loudons opened the door and let down the steps. Picking up an auto-carbine, he slung it and stepped out of the helicopter, Altamont behind him. They advanced to meet the party from the church, halting when they were about twenty feet apart.

"I must apologize, lieutenant, for dropping in on you so unceremoniously."

Loudons stopped, wondering if the man with the white beard understood a word of what he was saying.

"The natural way to come in, when you travel in the air," the old man replied. "At least, you came in openly. I can promise you a better reception than that you got at the city to the west of us a couple of days ago."

"Now how did you know that we had trouble the day-before-yesterday?" Loudons demanded.

The old man's eyes sparkled with child-like pleasure. "That surprises you, my dear sir? In a moment, I daresay you'll be surprised at the simplicity of it.

"You have a nasty rip in the left leg of your trousers, and the cloth around it is stained with blood. Through the rip, I perceive a bandage. Obviously, you have suffered a recent wound. I further observe that the side of your flying machine bears recent scratches, as though from the spears or throwing hatchets of the Scowrers. Evidently, they attacked you as you were landing. It is fortunate that these

cannibal devils are too stupid and too anxious for human flesh to exercise patience."

"Well, that explains how you knew that we'd recently been attacked," Loudons told him. "But how did you guess that it had been to the west of here, in a ruined city?"

"I never guess," the oldster with the silver bar and the keystone-shaped red patch on his left shoulder replied. "It is a shocking habit—destructive to the logical faculties. What seems strange to you is only so because you do not follow my train of thought.

"For example, the wheels and their framework under your flying machine are splashed with mud which seems to be predominantly brick-dust, mixed with plaster. Obviously, you landed recently in a dead city, either during or after a rain. There was a rain here yesterday evening, the wind being from the west. Obviously, you followed behind the rain as it came up the river. And now that I look at your boots, I see traces of the same sort of mud, around the soles and in front of the heels.

"But this is heartless of us, keeping you standing here on a wounded leg, sir. Come in, and let our medic take a look at it."

"Well, thank you, lieutenant," Loudons replied. "But don't bother your medic. I've attended to the wound myself, and it wasn't serious to begin with."

"You are a doctor?" the white-haired man asked.

"Of sorts. A sort of general scientist. My name is Loudons. My friend, Mr. Altamont, here, is a scientist, too."

There was an immediate reaction: all three of the elders of the village, and the young riflemen who had accompanied them, exchanged glances of surprise.

Loudons dropped his hand to the grip of his slung auto-carbine and Altamont sidled away from his partner, his hand moving as if by accident toward the butt of his pistol. The same thought was in both men's minds, that these people might feel, as the heritage of the war of two centuries ago, a hostility to science and scientists.

There was no hostility, however, in their manner as the old man came forward with outstretched hand.

"I am Tenant Mycroft Jones, the Toon Leader here," he said. "This is Stamford Rawson, our Reader, and Verner Hughes, our Toon Sarge. This is his son, Murray Hughes, the Toon Sarge of the Irregulars.

"But come into the Aitch-Cue House, gentlemen. We have much to talk about."

By this time, the villagers had begun to emerge from the log cabins and rubble-walled houses around the plaza and the old church. Some of them, mostly the young men, were carrying rifles, but the majority were unarmed. About half of them were women, in short deerskin skirts or homespun dresses. There were a number of children, the younger ones almost completely naked.

"Sarge," the old man told one of the youths, "post a guard over this flying machine. Don't let anybody meddle with it. And have all the noncoms and techs report here, on the double." He turned and shouted up at the truncated steeple: "Atherton, sound 'All Clear!'"

A horn up in the belfry began blow-

ing, apparently to advise the people who had run from the fields into the forest that there was no danger.

They went through the open doorway of the old stone church and entered the big room inside. The building had evidently once been gutted by fire, two centuries ago, but portions of the wall had been restored. The floor had been replaced by one of rough planks, and there was a plank ceiling at about ten feet.

The room was apparently used as a community center. There were a number of benches and chairs, all very neatly made; and along one wall, out of the way, ten or fifteen long tables had been stacked, the tops in a pile and the trestles on the tops.

The walls were decorated with trophies of weapons—a number of M-12 rifles and M-16 submachine-guns, all in good, clean condition; a light machine rifle; two bazookas. Among them were cruder weapons, stone-and metal-tipped spears and clubs, the work of the wild men of the woods.

A stairway led to the second floor, and it was up this stairway that the man who bore the title of Toon Leader conducted them, to a small room furnished with a long table, a number of chairs, and several big wooden chests bound with iron.

"Sit down, gentlemen," the Toon Leader invited, going to a cupboard and producing a large bottle stoppered with a corncob and a number of small cups.

"It's a little early in the day," he went on, "but this is a very special occasion.

"You smoke a pipe, I take it?" he asked Altamont. "Then try some of this, of our own growth and curing."

He extended a doeskin moccasin, which seemed to be the tobacco container.

Altamont looked at the thing dubiously, then filled his pipe from it.

The oldster drew his pistol, pushed a little wooden plug into the vent, added some tow to the priming, and, aiming at the wall, snapped it. Evidently, at time the formality of plugging the vent had been overlooked: there were a number of holes in the wall there.

This time, however, the pistol didn't go off. The old man shook out the smoldering tow, blew it into flame, and lit a candle from it, offering the light to Altamont.

Loudons got out a cigar and lit it from the candle; the others filled and lighted pipes. The Toon Leader reprimed his pistol, then holstered it, took off his belt and laid it aside, an example the others followed.

They drank ceremoniously, and then seated themselves at the table. As they did, two more men entered the room. They were introduced as Alexander Barrett, the gunsmith and Stanley Markovitch, the distiller.

The Toon Leader began by asking, "You come, then, from the west?"

"Are you from Utah?" the gunsmith interrupted, suspiciously.

"Why, no, we're from Arizona. A place called Fort Ridgeway," Loudons said.

The others nodded, in the manner of people who wish to conceal ignorance. It was obvious that none of them had ever heard of Fort Ridgeway, or Arizona either.

"You say you come from a fort? Then the wars aren't over yet?" Sarge Hughes asked.

"The wars have been over for a long time. You know how terrible they were. You know how few in all the countries were left alive," Loudons said.

"None that we know of, beside ourselves and the Scowrers, until you came," the Toon Leader said.

"We have found only a few small groups, in the whole country, who have managed to save anything of the Old Times. Most of them lived in little villages and cultivated land. A few had horses or cows. None, that we have ever found before, made guns and powder for themselves. But they remembered that they were men, and did not eat one another.

"Whenever we find a group of people like this, we try to persuade them to let us help them."

"Why?" the Toon Leader asked. "Why do you do this for people that you have never met before? What do you want from them—from us—in return for your help?"

He was speaking to Altamont, rather than to Loudons. It seemed obvious that he believed Altamont to be the leader and Loudons the subordinate.

"Because we are trying to bring back the best of the Old Times," Altamont told him. "Look, you have had troubles, here. So have we, many times. Years when the crops didn't ... didn't...." He looked at Loudons, aware that his partner should be talking now, and also suddenly aware that Loudons had recognized the situation and left the leadership up to him....

"... years that the crops failed. Years of storms, or floods. Troubles with those beast-men in the woods.

"And you were alone, as we were, with no one to help.

"We want to put all men who are still men in touch with one another, so that they can help each other in trouble, and work together.

"If this isn't done, everything that makes men different from beasts will soon be no more."

"He's right. One of us, alone, is helpless," the Reader said. "It is only in the Toon that there is strength. He wants to organize a Toon of all Toons."

"That's about it. We are beginning to make helicopters, like the one Loudons and I came in. We'll furnish your community with one or more of them. We can give you a radio, so that you can communicate with other communities. We can give you rifles and machine guns and ammunition, to fight the—the Scowrers, did you call them? And we can give you atomic engines, so that you can build machines for yourselves."

"Some of our people,—Alex Barrett here, the gunsmith, and Stan Markovitch, the distiller, and Harrison Grant, the ironworker—get their living by making things. How'd they make out, after your machines came in here?" Verner Hughes asked.

"We've thought of that. We had that problem with other groups we've helped," Loudons said. "In some communities, everybody owns everything in common and so we don't have much of a problem. Is that the way you do it, here?"

"Well, no. If a man makes a thing, or digs it out of the ruins, or catches it in the

woods, it's his."

"Then we'll work out some way. Give the machines to the people who are already in a trade, or something like that. We'll have to talk it over with you and with the people concerned."

"How is it you took so long finding us?" Alex Barrett asked. "It's been two hundred or so years since the Wars."

"Alex! You see but you do not observe!" The Toon Leader rebuked. "These people have their flying machines, which are highly complicated mechanisms. They would have to make tools and machines to make them, and tools and machines to make those tools and machines. They would have to find materials, often going in search of them. The marvel is not that they took so long, but that they did it so quickly."

"That's right," Altamont said. "Originally, Fort Ridgeway was a military research and development center. As the country became disorganized, the Government set this project up to develop ways of improvising power and transportation and communication methods and extracting raw materials. If they'd had a little more time, they might have saved the country.

"As it was, they were able to keep themselves alive, and keep something like civilization going at the Fort, while the whole country was breaking apart around them.

"Then, when the rockets stopped falling, they started to rebuild. Fortunately, more than half the technicians at the Fort were women, so there was no question of them dying out.

"But it's only been in the last twenty years that we've been able to make nuclear-electric engines, and this is the first time any of us have gotten east of the Mississippi."

"How did your group manage to survive?" Loudons asked. "You call it the Toon. I suppose that's what the word platoon has become, with time. You were, originally, a military platoon?"

"Pla-toon!" the white-bearded man said. "Of all the unpardonable stupidities! Of course that's what it was. And the title, Tenant, was originally lieu-tenant. I know that, though we have dropped all use of the first part of the word. But that should have led me, if I had used my wits, to deduce platoon from toon."

The Tenant shook his head in dismay at his stupidity and Loudons found himself forced to say, "One syllable like that could have come from many words."

4

The Tenant smiled at Loudons and said, "Your courtesy does not excuse our stupidity. We know our history and we should have identified the word accurately.

"Yes, we were originally a ... a platoon of soldiers, two hundred years ago, at the time when the Wars ended. The old Toon, and the First Tenant, were guarding POWs, and there, sir,"—to Loudons—"is a word we cannot trace. We have no idea what they were. In any event, the pows were all killed by a big bomb, and the First Tenant, Lieutenant Gilbert Dunbar, took his platoon and started to march to DeeCee, where the government was.

"But there was no government any more.

"They fought with people along the way. When they needed food, or ammunition, or animals to pull their wagons, they took them, and killed those who tried to prevent them. Other people joined the toon, and when they found women they wanted, they took them.

"They did all sorts of things that would have been crimes if there had been any law, but since there was no law, it was obvious that they could be no crime.

"The First Ten—Lieutenant—kept his men together, because he had The Books. Each evening, at the end of each day's march, he read to his men out of them."

Altamont knew without looking at his associate that Loudons would be inconspicuously jotting down notes. The last was an item the sociologist would be sure to record: the white-bearded Tenant had pronounced that reference to a written testament in capital letters.

The story was continuing....

"... finally, they came here. There had been a town here, but it had been burned and destroyed, and there were people camping in the ruins.

"Some of them fought and were killed, others came in and joined the platoon.

"At first, they built shelters around this building and made this their fort. Then they cleared away the ruins, and built new houses. When the cartridges for the rifles began to get scarce, they began to make gunpowder, and new rifles, like these we are using now, to shoot without cartridges.

"Lieutenant Dunbar did this out of his own knowledge because there is nothing in The Books about making gunpowder. The guns in The Books are rifles and shotguns and revolvers and airguns. Except for the airguns, which we haven't been able to make, these all shot cartridges.

"As with your people, we did not die out because we too had women. Neither did we increase greatly—too many died or were killed young. But several times we've had to tear down the wall and rebuild it, to make room inside for more houses. And we've been clearing out a little more land for the fields each year.

"We still read and follow the teachings of The Books: we have made laws for ourselves out of them."

There was a silence during which Altamont felt himself to be the focus of attention; not obtrusively, but, nonetheless, insistently. However, this was Loudon's field and Altamont preferred not to speak.

"And we are waiting for the Slain and Risen One," Tenant Jones added, and there was no doubt that he was looking at Altamont intently. "It is impossible that He will not, sooner or later, deduce the existence of this community, if He has not done so already."

Again the silence and lack of movement, broken by Loudons this time, when he picked up the candle to re-lit his cigar. Mentally, Altamont thanked his partner.

"Well, sir," the Toon Leader changed the subject abruptly, "enough of this talk about the past. If I understand rightly, it is the future in which you gentlemen are interested." He pushed back the cuff of his hunting shirt and looked at an old and worn wrist watch. "Eleven hundred: we'll have lunch shortly.

"This afternoon, you will meet the other people of the Toon, and this evening, at eighteen hundred, we'll have a mess together. Then, when we have everyone together, we can talk over your offer to help us, and decide what it is that you can give us that we can use."

"You spoke, a while ago, of what you could do for us, in return," Altamont said. He knew that now he would have to be the one to stress their original mission: Loudons would probably be so fascinated by this society that the sociologist might never remember the primary reason for coming to Pittsburgh.

"There's one thing you can do, no further away than tomorrow, if you're willing."

He had no time to wonder at the interchange of glances around the table before the Toon Leader said, "And that is—?"

"In Pittsburgh, somewhere, there is an underground crypt, full of books. Not printed and bound books, but spools of microfilm. Do you know what that is?"

The men of the Toon shook their heads. Altamont continued:

"They are spools on which strips of films are wound and on which pictures have been taken of books, page by page. We can make other, larger pictures from them, big enough to be read—"

"Oh, photographs, which you can enlarge. I can understand that. You mean, you can make many copies of them?"

"That's right. And you shall have copies, as soon as we can take the originals back to Fort Ridgeway, where we have the equipment for enlarging them. But while we have information which will help us to find the crypt where the books are, we will need help in getting it open."

"Of course! This is wonderful. Copies of The Books!" the Reader exclaimed. "We thought that we had the only one left in the world!"

"Not just The Books, Stamford, other books," the Toon Leader told him. "The books mentioned in The Books. But of course we will help you. You have a map to show where they are?"

"Not a map, just some information. But we can work out the location of the crypt."

"A ritual," Stamford Rawson said happily. "Of course!"

5

They lunched together at the house of Toon Sarge Hughes with the Toon Leader and the Reader and five or six of the leaders of the community. The food was plentiful, but Altamont found himself wishing that the first book they found in the Carnegie Library crypt would be a cook-book.

In the afternoon, he and Loudons separated.

Loudons attached himself to the Tenant, the Reader and an old woman, Irene Klein, who was almost a hundred years old and was the repository and arbiter of most of the community's oral legends.

Altamont, on the other hand, started with Alex Barrett, the gunsmith, and Mordecai Ricci, the miller, to inspect the gunshop and the grist mill. They were later joined by a half dozen more of the village craftsmen and so also visited the forge and foundry, the sawmill and the wagon shop. Altamont additionally looked at the flume, a rough structure of

logs lined with sheet aluminum; and at the nitriary, a shed-roofed pit in which potassium nitrate was extracted from the community's animal refuse.

But he reversed matters when it came to visiting the powder mill on the island: he became the host and took them by helicopter to the island and then for a trip up the river.

The guests were a badly-scared lot, for the first few minutes, as they watched the ground receding under them through the transparent plastic nose. Then, when nothing serious seemed to be happening, exhilaration took the place of fear. By the time they set down on the tip of the island, the eight men were confirmed aviation enthusiasts.

The trip up-river was an even bigger success, the high point coming when Altamont set his controls for Hover, pointed out a snarl of driftwood in the stream, and allowed his passengers to fire one of the machine-guns at it.

The lead balls of their own black-powder rifles would have plunked into the water-logged wood without visible effect. The copper-jacketed machine-gun bullets ripped it to splinters.

They returned for a final visit to the distillery awed by what they had seen.

6

"Monty, I don't know what the devil to make of this crowd," Loudons said, that evening, after the feast, when they had entered the helicopter and were preparing to retire.

"We've run into some weird communities—that lot down in New Mexico who live in the church and claim that they have a divine mission to redeem the world by prayer, fasting, and flagellation.

"Or those yogis in Los Angeles—"

"Or the Blackout Boys in Detroit!" Altamont interrupted. He had good reason to remember them.

"That's understandable," Loudons said, "after what their ancestors went through in the last war. And so are the others, in their own way.

"But this crowd here!" Loudons put down his cigar and began chewing on his mustache, a sure sign that he was more than puzzled: he was a very worried man.

Altamont respected his partner's abilities in this area. However, he also knew that the best way to get his friend to work any problem was to have him do it in conversation.

"What has you stopped, Jim?"

"Number of things, Monty. They're hard to explain because—" the sociologist shrugged, winced a little as the gesture pushed his leg down on the edge of his bunk—"well, let me just mention them.

"These people are the descendants of an old United States Army platoon, yet they have a fully-developed religion centered on a slain and resurrected god.

"Now, Monty, with all due respect to the old US Army, that just doesn't make sense! Normally, it would take thousands of years for a slain-god religion to develop, and then only in a special situation, from the field-fertility magic of primitive agriculturists.

"Well, you saw those people's fields from the air. Some members of that old platoon were men who knew the latest methods of scientific farming. They didn't need naive fairy tales about the planting

and germination of seed."

"Sure this religion isn't just a variant of Christianity?"

"Absolutely not!

"In the first place, these Sacred Books cannot be the Bible—you heard Tenant Jones say that they mentioned firearms that used cartridges. That means they can't be older than 1860 at the earliest.

"And, in the second place, this slain god wasn't crucified, or put to death by any form of execution: he perished, together with his enemy, in combat, and both god and devil were later resurrected."

Loudons picked up his cigar again. "By the way, the Enemy is supposed to be the master-mind back of these cannibal savages in the woods and also in the ruins."

"Did you get a look at these Sacred Books, or find out what they might be?"

Loudons shook his head disgustedly. "Every time I brought up the question, they evaded me. The Tenant sent the Reader out to bring in this old lady, Irene Klein—she was a perfect gold-mine of information about the history and traditions of the platoon, by the way—and then he sent the Reader out on some other errand, undoubtedly to pass the word around not to talk to us about their religion."

"I don't get that," Altamont said. "They showed me everything—their gunshop, their powder mill, their defenses, everything."

He smoked in silence for a moment, then added, in an apologetic tone, "Jim, I'm sure you've thought of this: the slain god couldn't be the original platoon commander, could he?"

"I've thought of it, and he isn't, Monty.

"No, definitely not, though they have the greatest respect for his memory—decorate his grave regularly, drink toasts to him, and so on. But he hasn't been deified. They got the idea for this god of theirs out of the Sacred Books."

Loudons put the cigar down again and returned to chewing his mustache. "Monty, this has me worried like the devil:

"I believe that they suspect that you are the Slain and Risen One!"

Altamont considered the idea, then nodded slowly. "Could be, at that. I know the Tenant came up to me, very respectfully, and said, 'I hope you don't think, sir, that I was presumptuous in trying to display my humble deductive abilities to you.'"

"What did you say?" Loudons demanded rather sharply.

"Told him certainly not, that he'd used a good, quick method of demonstrating that he and his people weren't like those mindless subhumans in the woods."

"That was all right," Loudons approved, but then his worries returned. "I don't know how we're going to handle this—"

"Jim, how about that pows business? Is there something there?"

"Monty!" Loudons voice was drily chiding as he took a pad of paper and scribbled briefly. "Take a look and figure for yourself."

Altamont looked at the paper. Loudons had simply printed the first three letters of the word in capitals and sepa-

rated each letter with a period. "Ouch! Yes, of course, that's what an infantry platoon would be guarding.

"Go ahead, Jim, this is your end of our business. I'll stay out of it and, especially, I'll keep my mouth shut."

"I don't think you'll be able to," Loudons said soberly. "As things stand now, they only suspect that you are their deity.

"And that means this: we're on trial here!"

"We have been in spots like this before, Jim," Altamont reminded his friend.

"Not like this, Monty, and let me explain.

"I get the impression here that logic, not faith, is the supreme religious virtue. And get this, Monty, because it's something practically unheard of: skepticism is a religious obligation, not a sin!

"I wish I knew...."

7

Tenant Mycroft Jones, Reader Stamford Rawson, Toon Sarge Verner Hughes, and his son, Murray Hughes, sat around the bare-topped table in the room on the second floor of the Aitch-Cue House. A lighted candle flickered in the cool breeze that came in through the open window, throwing their shadows back and forth on the walls.

"Pass the tantalus, Murray," the Tenant said, and the youngest of the four handed the corncob-corked bottle to the eldest. Tenant Jones filled his cup and then sat staring at it, while Verner Hughes thrust his pipe into the toe of the moccasin and filled it. Finally, the Tenant drank about half the clear, wild-plum brandy.

"Gentlemen, I am baffled," he confessed. "We have three alternate possibilities here and we dare not disregard any of them.

"Either this man who calls himself Altamont is truly He, or his is merely what we are asked to believe, one of a community of men like ours, with more of the old knowledge than we possess."

"You know my views," Verner Hughes said. "I cannot believe that He was more than a man, as we are. A great, a good, a wise man, but a man and mortal."

"Let's not go into that, now." The Reader emptied his cup and took the bottle, filling it again. "You know my views, too. I hold that He is no longer upon earth in the flesh, but lives in the spirit and is only with us in the spirit.

"But you said there were three possibilities, none of which can be eliminated. What was your third possibility, Tenant?"

"That they are creatures of the Enemy, perhaps that one or the other of them is the Enemy."

Reader Rawson, lifting his cup to his lips, almost strangled. The Hugheses, father and son stared at Tenant Jones in horror.

"The Enemy—with such weapons and resources!" Murray Hughes gasped. Then he emptied his cup and refilled it. "No! I can't believe that: he would have struck before this and wiped us all out!"

"Not necessarily, Murray," the Tenant replied. "Until he became convinced that his agents, the Scowrers, could do nothing against us, he would bide his time. He sits motionless, like a spider, at the center of the web; he does little himself;

his agents are numerous.

"Or, perhaps, he wishes to recruit us into this hellish organization."

"It is a possibility," the Reader admitted, "and one which we can neither accept or reject safely. And we must learn the truth as soon as possible. If this man is really He, we must not spurn Him on mere suspicion. If he is a man, come to help us, we must accept his help; if he is speaking the truth, the people who sent him could do wonders for us, and the greatest wonder would be to make us again a part of a civilized community.

"And if he is the Enemy...." Rawson left the sentence unfinished, but his face was grim.

"But if he is really He," Murray said, a little diffidently, for he was not yet accustomed to being included in the council of the elders, "I think we are on trial."

"What do you mean, son? Oh, I see. Of course, I don't believe that he is, but that's mere doubt, not negative certainty. However, if I'm wrong, if this man is truly He, we are worthy of him, we will penetrate his disguise."

"A very pretty problem, gentlemen," the Tenant said, smacking his lips over his brandy, "for all that it may be a deadly serious one for us. There is, of course, nothing we can do tonight. But, tomorrow, we have promised to help our visitors, whoever they may be, in searching for this crypt in the city.

"Murray, you were to be in charge of the detail that was to accompany them. Carry on as arranged, and say nothing of our suspicions, but advise your men to keep a sharp watch on the strangers, that they may learn all they can from them.

"Stamford, you and Verner and I will go along. We should, if we have any wits at all, observe something."

8

"Listen to this infernal thing!" Altamont raged. "'Wielding a gold-plated spade handled with oak from an original rafter of the Congressional Library, at three-fifteen one afternoon last week—' One afternoon last week!" He cursed luridly. "Why couldn't that blasted magazine say what afternoon? I've gone over a lot of twentieth century copies of that magazine and that expression was a regular cliche with them."

Loudons looked over his shoulder at the photostated magazine page.

"Well, we know it was between June thirteen and nineteen, inclusive," he said. "And there's a picture of the university president, complete with gold-plated spade, breaking ground. Call it Wednesday, the sixteenth. Over there's the tip of the shadow of the old Cathedral of Learning, about a hundred yards away. There are so many inexactitudes, that one'll probably cancel out the other."

"That's so, and it's also pretty futile getting angry at somebody who's been dead two hundred years, but why couldn't they say Wednesday, or Monday, or Saturday, or whatever?"

Monty checked back in the astronomical handbook, and the photostated pages of the old almanac, then looked over his calculations. "All right, here is the angle of the shadow, and the compass-bearing.

"I had a look, yesterday, when I was taking the local citizenry on that junket. The old baseball diamond at Forbes Field

is plainly visible, and I located the ruins of the Cathedral of Learning from that.

"Here's the above-sea-level altitude of the top of the tower. After you've landed us, go up to this altitude—use the barometric altimeter, not the radar—and hold position."

Loudons leaned forward from the desk to the contraption Altamont had rigged up in the nose of the helicopter; one of the telescope-sighted hunting rifles clamped in a vise, with a compass and a spirit-level under it.

"Rifle's pointing downward at the correct angle now?" he asked. "Good. Then all I have to do is to hold the helicopter steady, keep it at the right altitude, level and pointed in the right direction, and watch through the sight while you move the flag around, and direct you by radio."

"Simple, if I had been born quintuplets!"

"Mr. Altamont! Doctor Loudons!" a voice outside the helicopter called. "Are you ready for us now?"

Altamont went to the open door and looked out. The old Toon Leader, the Reader, Toon Sarge Hughes, his son and four young men in buckskins with slung rifles were standing outside.

"I have decided," the Tenant said, "that Mr. Rawson and Sarge Hughes and I would be of more help than an equal number of young men. We may not be as active, but we do know the old ruins better, especially the paths and hiding places of the Scowrers. These four young men you probably met last evening, but it will do no harm to introduce them again.

"Birdy Edwards; Sholto Jiminez; Jefferson Burns; Murdo Olsen."

"Very pleased, Tenant, gentlemen. I met all of you young men last evening and I remember you," Altamont said. "Now, if you'll crowd in here, I'll explain what we're going to try to do."

He showed them the old picture. "You see where the shadow of a tall building falls?" he asked. "We know the height and location of this building. Doctor Loudons will hold this helicopter at exactly the position of the top of the building and aim through the sights of the rifle, there. One of you will have this flag in his hand, and will move it back and forth. Doctor Loudons will tell us when the flag is in sight of the rifle."

"He'll need a good pair of lungs to do that," Verner Hughes commented.

"We'll use the radio. A portable set on the ground, and the helicopter's radio set," Altamont said.

To his surprise, he was met with looks of incomprehension. He had not supposed that these people would have lost all memory of radio communication.

"Why, that's wonderful!" the Reader exclaimed, when the explanation was concluded. "You can talk directly. How much better than just sending a telegram!"

"But, finding the crypt by the shadow, that's exactly like the—" Murray Hughes began, then stopped short. Immediately, he began talking about the rifle that was to be used as a surveying transit, comparing it with the ones in the big first-floor room at the Aitch-Cue House.

Locating the point where the shadow of the old Cathedral of Learning had

fallen proved easier than either Altamont or Loudons had expected. The towering building was now a tumbled mass of slagged rubble, but it was quite possible to determine its original center, and with the old data from the excellent reference library at Fort Ridgeway, its height above sea level was known. After a little jockeying, the helicopter came to a hovering stop, and the slanting barrel of the rifle in the vise pointed downward along the line of the shadow that had been cast on that afternoon in June, 1993.

The cross-hairs of the scope sight centered almost exactly on the spot Altamont had estimated on the map.

Guiding himself by peering through the rifle-sight, Loudons brought the helicopter slanting down to land on the sheet of fused glass that had once been a grassy campus.

"Well, this is probably it," Altamont said. "We didn't have to bother fussing around with that flag after all. That hump over there looks as though it had been a small building, and there's nothing corresponding to it on the city map. That may be the bunker over the stair-head to the crypt."

They began unloading equipment—a small, portable nuclear-electric conversion unit, a powerful solenoid-hammer, crowbars and intrenching tools, tins of blasting plastic. They took out the two hunting rifles and the auto-carbines, and Altamont showed the young men of Murray Hughes' detail how to use them.

"If you will pardon me, sir," the Tenant said to Altamont, "I think it would be a good idea if your companion went up in the flying machine and circled over us, to keep watch for the Scowrers. There are quite a few of them, particularly farther up the rivers, to the east, where the damage was not so great and they can find cellars and shelters and buildings to live in."

"Good idea. That way, we won't have to put out guards," Altamont said. "From the looks of this, we'll need every body to help dig into that thing. Hand out one of the portable radios, Jim and go up to about a thousand feet. If you see anything suspicious, give us a yell, then spray it with bullets, and find out what it is afterward."

They waited until the helicopter had climbed to position and was circling above, and then turned their attention to the place where the sheet of fused earth and stone bulged upward. It must have been almost ground-zero of one of the hydrogen-bombs: the wreckage of the Cathedral of Learning had fallen predominantly to the north, and the Carnegie Library was tumbled to the east.

"I think the entrance would be on this side, toward the Library," Altamont said. "Let's try it, to begin with."

He used the solenoid-hammer, slowly pounding a hole in the glaze, and placed a small charge of the plastic explosive. Chunks of the lava-like stuff pelted down between the little mound and the huge one of the old library, blowing a hole six feet in diameter and the two and a half feet deep, revealing concrete bonded with crushed steel-mill slag.

"We missed the door," Altamont said. "That means we'll have to tunnel in through who knows how much concrete. Well...."

He used a second and larger charge,

after digging a hole a foot deep. When he and his helpers came up to look, they found a large mass of concrete blown out, and solid steel behind it. Altamont cut two more holes, one on either side of the blown-out place, and fired a charge in each of them, bringing down more concrete.

He found he hadn't missed the door after all. It had merely been concreted over.

A few more shots cleared it, and after some work, they got it open. There was a room inside, concrete-floored and entirely empty. Altamont stood in the doorway and inspected the interior with his flashlight; he heard somebody behind him say something about a most peculiar sort of dark-lantern.

Across the small room, on the opposite wall, was a bronze plaque.

The plaque carried quite a lengthy inscription, including the names of all the persons and institutions participating in the microfilm project. The History Department at the Fort would be interested in that, but the only thing that interested Altamont was the statement that the floor had been laid over the trapdoor leading to the vault where the microfilms were stored. He went outside to the radio.

"Hello, Jim. We're inside, but the films were stored in an underground vault, and so we have to tear up a concrete floor," he said. "Go back to the village and gather up all the men you can carry. I don't want to use explosives inside. The interior of the crypt oughtn't to be damaged. Besides, I don't know what a blast in there might do to the film, and I don't want to take any chances."

"No, of course not. How thick do you think the floor is?"

"Haven't the least idea. Plenty thick, I would guess. Those films would have to be well-buried, to shield them from radioactivity. We can expect that it will take some time."

"All right. I'll be back as soon as I can."

The helicopter turned and went windmilling away, over what had been the Golden Triangle, down the Ohio. Altamont went back to the little concrete bunker and sat down, lighting his pipe. Murray Hughes and his four riflemen spread out, one circling around the glazed butte that had been the Cathedral of Learning, another climbing to the top of the old Library, and the others taking positions to the south and east.

Altamont sat in silence, smoking his pipe and trying to form some conception of the wealth under that concrete floor.

It was no use.

Jim Loudons probably understood a little more clearly what those books would mean to the world of today, and what they could do toward shaping the world of the future.

There was a library at Fort Ridgeway, and it was an excellent one ... for its purpose. In 1996, when the rockets had come crashing down, it had contained the cream of the world's technical knowledge—and very little else. There was only a little fiction, a few books of ideas, just enough to give the survivors a tantalizing glimpse of the world of their fathers.

But now....

A rifle banged to the south and east, and banged again. Either Murray Hughes

or Birdy Edwards: it was one of the two hunting rifles from the helicopter.

On the heels of the reports, they heard a voice shouting, "Scowrers! A lot of them, coming from up the river!"

A moment later, there was a light whip-crack of one of the muzzleloaders, from the top of the old Carnegie Library, and Altamont could see a wisp of grey-white smoke drifting away from where it had been fired.

Altamont jumped to his feet and raced for the radio, picking it up and bring it to the bunker.

Tenant Jones, old Reader Rawson, and Verner Hughes had caught up their rifles. The Tenant was shouting. "Come on in! Everybody, come on in!"

The boy on top of the library began scrambling down. Another came running from the direction of the half-demolished Cathedral of Learning, a third from the baseball field that had served as Altamont's point of reference the afternoon before.

The fourth, Murray Hughes, was running in from the ruins of the old Carnegie Tech buildings, and Birdy Edwards sped up the main road from Schenley Park. Once, twice, as he ran, Murray Hughes paused, turned, and fired behind him.

Then his pursuers came into sight!

They ran erect, they wore a few rags of skin garments, and they carried spears and hatchets and clubs, so they were probably classifiable as men. But their hair was long and unkempt, and their bodies were almost black with dirt and from the sun. A few of them were yelling, but most of them ran silently. They ran more swiftly than the boy they were pursuing: the distance between them narrowed every moment. There were at least fifty of them.

Verner Hughes' rifle barked, one of them dropped. As cooly as though he were shooting squirrels instead of his son's pursuers, he dropped the butt of the rifle to the ground, poured a charge of powder, patched a ball and rammed it home, replaced the ramrod. Tenant Jones fired then, and Birdy Edwards joined them, beginning to shoot with the telescope-sighted rifle.

The young man who had been north of the Cathedral of Learning had one of the auto-carbines; luckily, Altamont had providently set the control for semi-auto before giving it to him. He dropped to one knee and began to empty the clip, shooting slowly and deliberately, picking off the runners who were in the lead.

The boy who had started to climb down off the Library halted, fired his flintlock, and began reloading it.

Altamont, sitting down and propping his elbows on his knees, took both hands to the automatic which was his only weapon, emptying the magazine and replacing it. The last three savages he shot in the back: they had had enough and were running for their lives.

So far, everybody was safe. The boy in the Library came down through a place where the wall had fallen. Murray Hughes stopped running and came slowly toward the bunker, putting a fresh clip into his rifle. The others came drifting in.

"Altamont, calling Loudons," the scientist from Fort Ridgeway was saying into the radio. "Monty to Jim: can you hear me?"

Silence.

"We'd better get ready for another attack," Birdy Edwards said. "There's another gang coming from down that way. I never saw so many Scowrers!"

"Maybe there's a reason, Birdy," Tenant Jones said. "The Enemy is after big game, this time."

"Jim, where the devil are you?" Altamont fairly yelled into the radio; and as he did, he knew the answer. Loudons was in the village, away from the helicopter, gathering tools and workers.

Nothing to do but keep on trying!

"Here they come!" Reader Rawson warned.

"How far can these rifles be depended on?" Birdy Edwards wanted to know.

Altamont straightened, saw the second band of savages approaching about four hundred yards away.

"Start shooting now," he said. "Aim for the upper part of their bodies."

The two auto-loading rifles began to crack. After the first few shots, the savages took cover. Evidently they understood the capabilities and limitations of the villagers' flintlocks, but this was a terrifying surprise to them.

"Jim!"—Altamont was almost praying into the radio—"Come in, Jim!"

"What is it, Monty? I was outside."

Altamont told him.

"Those fellows you had up with you yesterday, think they could be trusted to handle the guns? A couple of them are here with me," Loudons inquired.

"Take a chance on it! It won't cost anything but my life, and that's not worth much at the present."

"All right, hold on. We'll be there in a few minutes."

"Loudons is bringing the helicopter," Altamont told the others. "All we have to do is to hold on, here, until he comes."

A naked savage raised his head from behind what might, two hundred years ago, have been a cement park-bench and he was only a hundred yards away. Reader Rawson promptly killed him and began reloading.

"I think you're right, Tenant," he said. "The Scowrers have never attacked in bands like this before. They must have a powerful reason and I can think of only one."

"That's what I'm beginning to think, too," Verner Hughes agreed. "At least, we've eliminated the third of your possibilities, Tenant. And I think probably the second, as well."

Altamont wondered what they were double-talking about. There wasn't any particular mystery about the mass attack of the wild men to him.

Debased as they were, they still possessed speech and the ability to transmit experiences. No matter how beclouded in superstition, they still remembered that aircraft dropped bombs, and bombs killed people, and where people had been killed, they would find fresh meat. They had seen the helicopter circling about, and had heard the blasting: everyone in the area had been drawn to the scene as soon as Loudons had gone down the river.

But they seemed to have forgotten that aircraft carried guns, although they did spring to their feet and start to run at

the return of the helicopter.

However, most of them did not run far.

9

Altamont and Loudons shook hands many times in front of the Aitch-Cue House, and listened to many good wishes, and repeated their promise to return. Most of the microfilmed books were to be stored in the old church. They were taking with them only the catalogue and a few of the most important works. Finally, they entered the helicopter. The crowd shouted farewell as they rose.

Altamont, at the controls, waited until they had gained five thousand feet, then turned on a compass-course for Colony Three.

"I can't wait until we're in radio range of the Fort, Jim. This is one report that I really want to make," he said.

"Of all the wonderful luck!" he went on. "And I don't know which is the more important: finding those books, or finding those people. In a few years, when we can get them supplied with modern equipment and instructed in its use—

"What's the matter, Jim? You should be even more excited than I am."

"I'm not very happy about this, Monty," Loudons confessed. "I keep thinking about what's going to happen to them."

"Why, nothing's going to happen to them. They're going to be given the means of producing more food, keeping more of them alive, giving them more leisure to develop themselves in—"

"Monty, I saw the Sacred Books."

"The deuce! What were they?"

"It. One volume. A collection of works. We have it at the Fort and I've read it. How I ever missed all those clues—"

"You see, Monty, what I'm worried about is what's going to happen to those people when they find out that we're not really Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson...."

THE RING OF THOTH

MR. JOHN VANSITTART SMITH, F.R.S., of 147A Gower Street, was a man whose energy of purpose and clearness of thought might have placed him in the very first rank of scientific observers. He was the victim, however, of a universal ambition which prompted him to aim at distinction in many subjects rather than pre-eminence in one. In his early days he had shown aptitude for zoology and for botany which caused his friends to look upon him as a second Darwin, but when a professorship was almost within his reach he had suddenly discontinued his studies and turned his whole attention to chemistry. Here his researches upon the spectra of the metals had won him his fellowship in the Royal Society; but again he played the coquette with his subject, and after a year's absence from the laboratory he joined the Oriental Society, and delivered a paper on the Hieroglyphic and Demotic inscriptions of El Kab, thus giving a crowning example both of the versatility and of the inconstancy of his talents.

The most fickle of wooers, however,

is apt to be caught at last, and so it was with John Vansittart Smith. The more he burrowed his way into Egyptology the more impressed he became by the vast field which it opened to the inquirer, and by the extreme importance of a subject which promised to throw a light upon the first germs of human civilisation and the origin of the greater part of our arts and sciences. So struck was Mr. Smith that he straightway married an Egyptological young lady who had written upon the sixth dynasty, and having thus secured a sound base of operations he set himself to collect materials for a work which should unite the research of Lepsius and the ingenuity of Champollion. The preparation of his magnum opus entailed many hurried visits to the magnificent Egyptian collections of the Louvre, upon the last of which, no longer ago than the middle of last October, he became involved in a most strange and noteworthy adventure.

The trains had been slow and the Channel had been rough, so that the student arrived in Paris in a somewhat befogged and feverish condition. On reaching the Hotel de France, in the Rue Laffitte, he had thrown himself upon a sofa for a couple of hours, but finding that he was unable to sleep, he determined, in spite of his fatigue, to make his way to the Louvre, settle the point which he had come to decide, and take the evening train back to Dieppe. Having come to his conclusion, he donned his greatcoat, for it was a raw rainy day, and made his way across the Boulevard des Italiens and down the Avenue de l'Opera. Once in the Louvre he was on familiar ground, and he speedily made his way to the collection of papyri which it was his intention to consult.

The warmest admirers of John Vansittart Smith could hardly claim for him that he was a handsome man. His high-beaked nose and prominent chin had something of the same acute and incisive character which distinguished his intellect. He held his head in a birdlike fashion, and birdlike, too, was the pecking motion with which, in conversation, he threw out his objections and retorts. As he stood, with the high collar of his greatcoat raised to his ears, he might have seen from the reflection in the glass-case before him that his appearance was a singular one. Yet it came upon him as a sudden jar when an English voice behind him exclaimed in very audible tones, "What a queer-looking mortal!"

The student had a large amount of petty vanity in his composition which manifested itself by an ostentatious and overdone disregard of all personal considerations. He straightened his lips and looked rigidly at the roll of papyrus, while his heart filled with bitterness against the whole race of travelling Britons.

"Yes," said another voice, "he really is an extraordinary fellow."

"Do you know," said the first speaker, "one could almost believe that by the continual contemplation of mummies the chap has become half a mummy himself?"

He has certainly an Egyptian cast of countenance," said the other.

John Vansittart Smith spun round upon his heel with the intention of shaming his countrymen by a corrosive remark or two. To his surprise and relief, the two young fellows who had been conversing had their shoulders turned to-

wards him, and were gazing at one of the Louvre attendants who was polishing some brass-work at the other side of the room.

"Carter will be waiting for us at the Palais Royal," said one tourist to the other, glancing at his watch, and they clattered away, leaving the student to his labours.

"I wonder what these chatterers call an Egyptian cast of countenance," thought John Vansittart Smith, and he moved his position slightly in order to catch a glimpse of the man's face. He started as his eyes fell upon it. It was indeed the very face with which his studies had made him familiar. The regular statuesque features, broad brow, well-rounded chin, and dusky complexion were the exact counterpart of the innumerable statues, mummy-cases, and pictures which adorned the walls of the apartment. The thing was beyond all coincidence. The man must be an Egyptian. The national angularity of the shoulders and narrowness of the hips were alone sufficient to identify him.

John Vansittart Smith shuffled towards the attendant with some intention of addressing him. He was not light of touch in conversation, and found it difficult to strike the happy mean between the brusqueness of the superior and the geniality of the equal. As he came nearer, the man presented his side face to him, but kept his gaze still bent upon his work. Vansittart Smith, fixing his eyes upon the fellow's skin, was conscious of a sudden impression that there was something inhuman and preternatural about its appearance. Over the temple and cheek-bone it was as glazed and as shiny as varnished parchment. There was no suggestion of pores. One could not fancy a drop of moisture upon that arid surface. From brow to chin, however, it was cross-hatched by a million delicate wrinkles, which shot and interlaced as though Nature in some Maori mood had tried how wild and intricate a pattern she could devise.

"Ou est la collection de Memphis?" asked the student, with the awkward air of a man who is devising a question merely for the purpose of opening a conversation.

"C'est la," replied the man brusquely, nodding his head at the other side of the room.

"Vous etes un Egyptien, n'est-ce pas?" asked the Englishman.

The attendant looked up and turned his strange dark eyes upon his questioner. They were vitreous, with a misty dry shininess, such as Smith had never seen in a human head before. As he gazed into them he saw some strong emotion gather in their depths, which rose and deepened until it broke into a look of something akin both to horror and to hatred.

"Non, monsieur; je suis francais." The man turned abruptly and bent low over his polishing. The student gazed at him for a moment in astonishment, one of the doors he proceeded to make notes of his researches among the papyri. This thoughts, however refused to return into their natural groove. They would run upon the enigmatical attendant with the sphinx-like face and the parchment skin.

"Where have I seen such eyes?" said Vansittart Smith to himself. "There is something saurian about them, something reptilian. There's the membrana

nictitans of the snakes," he mused, bethinking himself of his zoological studies. "It gives a shiny effect. But there was something more here. There was a sense of power, of wisdom - so I read them - and of weariness, utter weariness, and ineffable despair. It may be all imagination, but I never had so strong an impression. By Jove, I must have another look at them!" He rose and paced round the Egyptian rooms, but the man who had excited his curiosity had disappeared.

The student sat down again in his quiet corner, and continued to work at his notes. He had gained the information which he required from the papyri, and it only remained to write it down while it was still fresh in his memory. For a time his pencil travelled rapidly over the paper, but soon the lines became less level, the words more blurred, and finally the pencil tinkled down upon the floor, and the head of the student dropped heavily forward upon his chest. Tired out by his journey, he slept so soundly in his lonely post behind the door that neither the clanking civil guard, nor the footsteps of sightseers, nor even the loud hoarse bell which gives the signal for closing, were sufficient to arouse him.

Twilight deepened into darkness, the bustle from the Rue de Rivoli waxed and then waned, distant Notre Dame clanged out the hour of midnight, and still the dark and lonely figure sat silently in the shadow. It was not until close upon one in the morning that, with a sudden gasp and an intaking of the breath, Vansittart Smith returned to consciousness. For a moment it flashed upon him that he had dropped asleep in his studychair at home. The moon was shining fitfully through the unshuttered window, however, and as his eye ran along the lines of mummies and the endless array of polished cases, he remembered clearly where he was and how he came there. The student was not a nervous man. He possessed that love of a novel situation which is peculiar to his race. Stretching out his cramped limbs, he looked at his watch, and burst into a chuckle as he observed the hour. The episode would make an admirable anecdote to be introduced into his next paper as a relief to the graver and heavier speculations. He was a little cold, but wide awake and much refreshed. It was no wonder that the guardians had overlooked him, for the door threw its heavy black shadow right across him.

The complete silence was impressive. Neither outside nor inside was there a creak or a murmur. He was alone with the dead men of a dead civilisation. What though the outer city reeked of the garish nineteenth century! In all this chamber there was scarce an article, from the shrivelled ear of wheat to the pigment-box of the painter, which had not held its own against four thousand years. Here was the flotsam and jetsam washed up by the great ocean of time from that far-off empire. From stately Thebes, from lordly Luxor, from the great temples of Heliopolis, from a hundred rifled tombs, these relics had been brought. The student glanced around at the long-silent figures who flickered vaguely up through the gloom, at the busy toilers who were now so restful, and he fell into a reverent and thoughtful mood. An unwonted sense of his own youth and insignificance came over him. Leaning back in his chair, he

gazed dreamily down the long vista of rooms, all silvery with the moonshine, which extend through the whole wing of the widespread building. His eyes fell upon the yellow glare of a distant lamp.

John Vansittart Smith sat up on his chair with his nerves all on edge. The light was advancing slowly towards him, pausing from time to time, and then coming jerkily onwards. The bearer moved noiselessly. In the utter silence there was no suspicion of the pat of a footfall. An idea of robbers entered the Englishman's head. He snuggled up farther into the corner. The light was two rooms off. Now it was in the next chamber, and still there was no sound. With something approaching to a thrill of fear the student observed a face, floating in the air as it were, behind the flare of the lamp. The figure was wrapped in shadow, but the light fell full upon a strange, eager face. There was no mistaking the metallic, glistening eyes and the cadaverous skin. It was the attendant with whom he had conversed.

Vansittart Smith's first impulse was to come forward and address him. A few words of explanation would set the matter clear, and lead doubtless to his being conducted to some side-door from which he might make his way to his hotel. As the man entered the chamber, however, there was something so stealthy in his movements, and so furtive in his expression, that the Englishman altered his intention. This was clearly no ordinary official walking the rounds. The fellow wore felt-soled slippers, stepped with a rising chest, and glanced quickly from left to right, while his hurried, gasping breathing thrilled the flame of his lamp. Vansittart Smith crouched silently back into the corner and watched him keenly, convinced that his errand was one of secret and probably sinister import.

There was no hesitation in the other's movements. He stepped lightly and swiftly across to one of the great cases, and, drawing a key from his pocket, he unlocked it. From the upper shelf he pulled down a mummy, which he bore away with him, and laid it with much care and solicitude upon the ground. By it he placed his lamp, and then squatting down beside it in Eastern fashion he began with long, quivering fingers to undo the cerecloths and bandages which girt it round. As the crackling rolls of linen peeled off one after the other, a strong aromatic odour filled the chamber, and fragments of scented wood and of spices pattered down upon the marble floor.

It was clear to John Vansittart Smith that this mummy had never been unswathed before. The operation interested him keenly. He thrilled all over with curiosity, and his bird-like head protruded farther and farther from behind the door. When, however, the last roll had been removed from the four-thousand-year-old head, it was all that he could do to stifle an outcry of amazement. First, a cascade of long, black, glossy tresses poured over the workman's hands and arms. A second turn of the bandage revealed a low, white forehead, with a pair of delicately arched eyebrows. A third uncovered a pair of bright, deeply fringed eyes, and a straight, well-cut nose, while a fourth and last showed a sweet, full, sensitive mouth, and a beautifully curved chin. The whole face was one of extraordinary loveliness, save for the one blemish that in the centre of the

forehead there was a single irregular, coffee-coloured splotch. It was a triumph of the embalmer's art. Vansittart Smith's eyes grew larger and larger as he gazed upon it, and he chirruped in his throat with satisfaction.

Its effect upon the Egyptologist was as nothing, however, compared with that which it produced upon the strange attendant. He threw his hands up into the air, burst into a harsh clatter of words, and then, hurling himself down upon the ground beside the mummy, he threw his arms round her, and kissed her repeatedly upon the lips and brow. "Ma petite!" he groaned in French. "Ma pauvre petite!" His voice broke with emotion, and his innumerable wrinkles quivered and writhed, but the student observed in the lamp-light that his shining eyes were still dry and tearless as two beads of steel. For some minutes he lay, with a twitching face, crooning and moaning over the beautiful head. Then he broke into a sudden smile, said some words in an unknown tongue, and sprang to his feet with the vigorous air of one who has braced himself for an effort.

In the centre of the room there was a large, circular case which contained, as the student had frequently remarked, a magnificent collection of early Egyptian rings and precious stones. To this the attendant strode, and, unlocking it, threw it open. On the ledge at the side he placed his lamp, and beside it a small, earthenware jar which he had drawn from his pocket. He then took a handful of rings from the case, and with a most serious and anxious face he proceeded to smear each in turn with some liquid substance from the earthen pot, holding them to the light as he did so. He was clearly disappointed with the first lot, for he threw them petulantly back into the case and drew out some more. One of these, a massive ring with a large crystal set in it, he seized and eagerly tested with the contents of the jar.

Instantly he uttered a cry of joy, and threw out his arms in a wild gesture which upset the pot and set the liquid streaming across the floor to the very feet of the Englishman. The attendant drew a red handkerchief from his bosom, and, mopping up the mess, he followed it into the corner, where in a moment he found himself face to face with his observer.

"Excuse me," said John Vansittart Smith, with all imaginable politeness; "I have been unfortunate enough to fall asleep behind this door."

"And you have been watching me?" the other asked in English, with a most venomous look on his corpselike face.

The student was a man of veracity. "I confess," said he, "that I have noticed your movements, and that they have aroused my curiosity and interest in the highest degree."

The man drew a long, flamboyant-bladed knife from his bosom. "You have had a very narrow escape," he said; "had I seen you ten minutes ago, I should have driven this through your heart. As it is, if you touch me or interfere with me in any way you are a dead man."

"I have no wish to interfere with you," the student answered. "My presence here is entirely accidental. All I ask is that you will have the extreme kindness to show me out through some side-door." He spoke with great suavity, for the man was still pressing the tip of his dagger

against the palm of his left hand, as though to assure himself of its sharpness, while his face preserved its malignant expression.

"If I thought -" said he. "But no, perhaps it is as well. What is your name?" The Englishman gave it.

"Vansittart Smith," the other repeated. "Are you the same Vansittart Smith who gave a paper in London upon El Kab? I saw a report of it. Your knowledge of the subject is contemptible."

"Sir!" cried the Egyptologist.

"Yet it is superior to that of many who make even greater pretensions. The whole keystone of our old life in Egypt was not the inscriptions or monuments of which you make so much, but was our hermetic philosophy and mystic knowledge of which you say little or nothing."

"Our old life!" repeated the scholar, wide-eyed; and then suddenly, "Good God, look at the mummy's face!"

The strange man turned and flashed his light upon the dead woman, uttering a long, doleful cry as he did so. The action of the air had already undone all the art of the embalmer. The skin had fallen away, the eyes had sunk inwards, the discoloured lips had writhed away from the yellow teeth, and the brown mark upon the forehead alone showed that it was indeed the same face which had shown such youth and beauty a few short minutes before.

The man flapped his hands together in grief and horror. Then mastering himself by a strong effort he turned his hard eyes once more upon the Englishman.

"It does not matter," he said, in a shaking voice. "It really does not matter. I came here to-night with the fixed determination to do something. It is now done. All else us as nothing. I have found my quest. The old curse is broken. I can rejoin her. What matter about her inanimate shell so long as her spirit is awaiting me at the other side of the veil!"

"These are wild words," said Vansittart Smith. He was becoming more and more convinced that he had to do with a madman.

"Time presses, and I must go," continued the other. "The moment is at hand for which I have waited this weary time. But I must show you out first. Come with me."

Taking up the lamp, he turned from the disordered chamber, and led the student swiftly through the long series of the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Persian apartments. At the end of the latter he pushed open a small door let into the wall and descended a winding, stone stair. The Englishman felt the cold, fresh air of the night upon his brow. There was a door opposite him which appeared to communicate with the street. To the right of this another door stood ajar, throwing a spurt of yellow light across the passage. "Come in here!" said the attendant shortly.

Vansittart Smith hesitated. He had hoped that he had come to the end of his adventure. Yet his curiosity was strong within him. He could not leave the matter unsolved, so he followed his strange companion into the lighted chamber.

It was a small room, such as is devoted to a concierge. A wood fire sparkled in the grate. At one side stood a truckle bed, and at the other a coarse, wooden chair, with a round table in the

centre, which bore the remains of a meal. As the visitor's eye glanced round he could not but remark with an ever-recurring thrill that all the small details of the room were of the most quaint design and antique workmanship. The candlesticks, the vases upon the chimney-piece, the fire-irons, the ornaments upon the walls, were all such as he had been wont to associate with the remote past. The gnarled, heavy-eyed man sat himself down upon the edge of the bed, and motioned his guest into the chair.

"There may be design in this," he said, still speaking excellent English. "It may be decreed that I should leave some account behind as a warning to all rash mortals who would set their wits up against workings of Nature. I leave it with you. Make such use as you will of it. I speak to you now with my feet upon the threshold of the other world.

"I am, as you surmised, an Egyptian—not one of the down-trodden race of slaves who now inhabit the Delta of the Nile, but a survivor of that fiercer and harder people who tamed the Hebrew, drove the Ethiopian back into the sourthern deserts, and built those mighty works which have been the envy and the wonder of all after generations. It was in the reign of Tuthmosis, sixteen hundred years before the birth of Christ, that I first saw the light. You shrink away from me. Wait, and you will see that I am more to be pitied than to be feared.

"My name was Sosra. My father had been the chief priest of Osiris in the great temple of abaris, which stood in those days upon the Bubastic branch of the Nile. I was brought up in the temple and was trained in all those mystic arts which are spoken of in your own Bible. I was an apt pupil. Before I was sixteen I had learned all which the wisest priest could teach me. From that time on I studied Nature's secrets for myself, and shared my knowledge with no man.

"Of all the questions which attracted me there were none over which I laboured so long as over those which concern themselves with the nature of life. I probed deeply into the vital principle. The aim of medicine had been to drive away disease when it appeared. It seemed to me that a method might be devised which should so fortify the body as to prevent weakness or death from ever taking hold of it. It is useless that I should recount my researches. You would scarce comprehend them if I did. They were carried out partly upon animals, partly upon slaves, and partly on myself. Suffice it that their result was to furnish me with a substance which, when injected into the blood, would endow the body with strength to resist the effects of time, of violence, or of disease;. It would not indeed confer immortality, but its potency would endure for many thousands of years. I used it upon a cat, and afterwards drugged the creature with the most deadly poisons. That cat is alive in Lower Egypt at the present moment. There was nothing of mystery or magic in the matter. It was simply a chemical discovery, which may well be made again.

"Love of life runs high in the young. It seemed to me that I had broken away from all human care now that I had abolished pain and driven death to such a distance. With a light heart I poured the accursed stuff into my veins. Then I looked

round for someone whom I could benefit. There was a young priest of Thoth, Parmes by name, who had won my goodwill by his earnest nature and his devotion to his studies. To him I whispered my secret, and at his request I injected him with my elixir. I should now, I reflected, never be with out a companion of the same age as myself.

"After this grand discovery I relaxed my studies to some extent, but Parmes continued his with redoubled energy. Every day I could see him working with his flasks and his distiller in the Temple of Thoth, but he said little to me as to the result of his labours. For my own part, I used to walk through the city and look around me with exultation as I reflected that all this was destined to pass away, and that only I should remain. The people would bow to me as they passed me, for the fame of my knowledge had gone abroad.

" There was war at this time, and the Great King had sent down his soldiers to the eastern boundary to drive away the Hyksos. A Governor, too, was sent to Abaris, that he might hold it for the King. I had heard much of the beauty of the daughter of this Governor, but one day as I walked out with Parmes we met her, borne upon the shoulders of her slaves. I was struck with love as with lightning. My heart went out from me. I could have thrown myself beneath the feet of her bearers. This was my woman. Life without her was impossible. I swore by the head of Horus that she should be mine. I swore it to the Priest of Thoth. He turned away f rom me with a brow which was as black as midnight.

There is no need to tell you of our wooing. She came to love me even as I loved her. I learned that Parmes had seen her before I did, and had shown her that he, too, lover her, but I could smile at his passion, for I knew that her heart was mine. The white plague had come upon the city and many were stricken, but I laid my hands upon the sick and nursed them without fear or scathe. She marvelled at my daring. Then I told her my secret, and begged her that she would let me use my art upon her.

"'Your flower shall then be unwithered, Atma,' I said. 'Other things may pass away, but you and I, and our great love for each other, shall outlive the tomb of King Chefru.'

"But she was full of timid, maidenly objections. Was it right?' she asked, 'was it not a thwarting of the will of the gods? If the great Osiris had wished that our years should be so long, would he not himself have brought it about?'

"With fond and loving words I overcame her doubts, and yet she hesitated. It was a great question, she said. She would think it over for this one night. In the morning I should know of her resolution. Surely one night was not too much to ask.

She wished to pray to Isis for help in her decision.

"With a sinking heart and a sad foreboding of evil I left her with her tirewomen. In the morning, when the early sacrifice was over, I hurried to her house. A rightened slave met me upon the steps. Her mistress was ill, she said, very ill. In a frenzy I broke my way through the attendants, and rushed through hall and corridor to my Atma's chamber. She lay upon her couch, her

head high upon the pillow, with a pallid face and glazed eye. On her forehead there blazed a single angry, purple patch. I knew that hell-mark of old. It was the scar of t he white plague, the sign-manual of death.

"Why should I speak of that terrible time? For months I was mad, fevered, delirious, and yet I could not die. Never did an Arab thirst after the sweet wells as I longed after death. Could poison or steel have shortened the thread of my existence, I should soon have rejoined my love in the land with the narrow portal. I tried, but it was of no avail. The accursed influence was too strong upon me. One night as I lay upon my couch, weak and weary, Parmes, the priest of Thoth, came to my chamber. He stood in the circle of the lamp-light, and he looked down upon me with eyes which were bright with a mad joy.

" 'Why did you let the maiden die?" he asked; 'why did you not strengthen her as you strengthened me?'

" 'I was too late,' I answered. 'But I had forgot. You also loved her. You are my fellow in misfortune. Is it not terrible to think of the centuries which must pass ere we look upon her again Fools, fools, that we were to take death to be our enemy!'

" 'You may say that,' he cried with a wild laugh; 'The words come well from your lips. For me they have no meaning.'

" 'What mean you? I cried, raising myself upon my elbow. 'Surely, friend, this grief has turned your brain.' His face was aflame with joy, and he writhed and shook like one who hath a devil.

" 'Do you know whither I go?' he asked.

" 'Nay,' I answered, 'I cannot tell.'

" 'I go to her,' said he. 'she lies embalmed in the farther tomb by the double palm-tree beyond the city wall.'

" 'Why do you go there?' I cried.

" 'To die!' he shrieked, 'to die! I am not bound by earthen fetters.'

" 'But the elixir is in your blood,' I cried.

" 'I can defy it,' said he; 'I have found a stronger principle which will destroy it. It is working in my veins at this moment, and in an hour I shall be a dead man. I shall join her, and you shall remain behind.'

"As I looked upon him I could see that he spoke words of truth. The light in his eye told me that he was indeed beyond the power of the elixir.

" 'You will teach me!' I cried.

" 'Never!' he answered.

" 'I implore you, by the wisdom of Thoth, by the majesty of Anubis!'

" 'It is useless,' he said coldly.

" 'Then I will find it out,' I cried.

" 'You cannot,' he answered; 'it came to me by chance. There is one ingredient which you can never get. Save that which is in the ring of Thoth, none will ever more be made.'

" 'In the ring of Thoth!' I repeated, 'where then is the ring of Thoth?'

" 'That also you shall never know,' he answered. 'You won her love. Who has won in the end? I leave you to your sordid earth life. My chains are broken. I must go!' He turned upon his heel and fled from the chamber. In the morning came the news that the Priest of Thoth was dead.

"My days after that were spent in study. I must find this subtle poison which was strong enough to undo the elixir. From early dawn to midnight I bent over the test-tube and the furnace. Above all, I collected the papyri and the chemical flasks of the Priest of Thoth. Alas! they taught me little. Here and there some hint or stray expression would raise hope in my bosom, but no good ever came of it. Still month after month, I struggled on. When my heart grew faint I would make my way to the tomb by the palm-trees. There, standing by the dead casket from which the jewel had been rifled, I would feel her sweet presence, and would whisper to her that I would rejoin her if mortal wit could solve the riddle.

"Parmes had said that his discovery was connected with the ring of Thoth. I had some remembrance of the trinket. It was a large and weighty circlet, made, not of gold, but of a rarer and heavier metal brought from the mines of Mount Harbal. Platinum, you call it. The ring had, I remembered, a hollow crystal set in it, in which some few drops of liquid might be stored. Now, the secret of Parmes could not have to do with the metal alone, for there were many rings of that metal in the Temple. Was it not more likely that he had stored his precious poison within the cavity of the crystal? I had scarce come to this conclusion before, in hunting through his papers, I came upon one which told me that it was indeed so, and that there was still some of the liquid unused.

"But how to find the ring? It was not upon him when he was stripped for the embalmer. Of that I made sure. Neither was it among his private effects. In vain I searched every room that he had entered, every box and vase and chattel that he had owned. I sifted the very sand of the desert in places where he had been wont to walk; but, do what I would, I could come upon no traces of the ring of Thoth. Yet it may be that my lab ours would have overcome all obstacles had it not been for a new and unlooked-for misfortune. "A great war had been waged against the Hyksos, and the Captains of the Great King had been cut off in the desert, with all their bowmen and horsemen. The shepherd tribes were upon us like the locusts in a dry year. From the wilderness of Shur to the great, bitter lake there was blood by day and fire by night. Abaris was the bulwark of Egypt, but we could not keep the savages back. The city fell. The Governor and the soldiers were put to the sword, and I, with many more was led away into captivity.

"For years and years I tended cattle in the great plains by the Euphrates. My master died, and his son grew old, but I was still as far from death as ever. At last I escaped upon a swift camel, and made my way back to Egypt. The Hyksos had settled in the land which they had conquered, and their own King ruled over the country. Abaris had been torn down, the city had been burned, and the great Temple there was nothing left save an unsightly mound. Everywhere the tombs had been rifled and the monuments destroyed. Of my Atma's grave no sign was left. It was buried in the sands of the desert, and the palm-trees which marked the spot had long disappeared. The papers of Parmes and the remains of the Temple of Thoth were either destroyed or scattered far and wide over the deserts

of Syria. All search after them was vain.

"From that time I gave up all hope of ever finding the ring or discovering the subtle drug. I set myself to live as patiently as might be until the effect of the elixir should wear away. How can you understand how terrible a thing time is, you who have experience only of the narrow course which lies between the cradle and the grave! I know it to my cost, I who have floated down the whole stream of history. I was old when ilium fell. I was very old when Herodotus came to Memphis. I was bowed down with years when the new gospel came upon earth. Yet you see me much as other men are, with the cursed elixir still sweetening my blood, and guarding me against that which I would court. Now, at last, at last I have come to the end of it!

"I have travelled in all lands and I have dwelt with all nations. Every tongue is the same to me. I learned them all to help pass the weary time. I need not tell you how slowly they drifted by, the long dawn of modern civilization, the dreary middle years, the dark times of barbarism. They are all behind me now. I have never looked with the eyes of love upon another woman. Atma knows that I have been constant to her.

"It was my custom to read all that the scholars had to say upon Ancient Egypt. I have been in many positions, sometimes affluent, sometimes poor, but I have always found enough to enable me to buy the journals which deal with such matters. Some nine months ago I was in San Francisco, when I read an account of some discoveries made in the neighbourhood of Abaris. My heart leapt into my mouth as I read it. It said that the excavator had busied himself in exploring some tombs recently unearth. In one there had been found an unopened mummy with an inscription upon the outer case setting forth that it contained the body of the daughter of the Governor of the city in the days of Tuthmosis. It added that on removing the outer case there had been exposed a large platinum ring set with a crystal, which had been laid upon the breast of the embalmed woman. This, then, was where Parmes had hid the ring of Thoth. He might well say that it was safe, for no Egyptian would ever stain his soul by moving even the outer case of a buried friend.

"That very night I set off from San Francisco, and in a few weeks I found myself once more at Abaris, if a few sandheaps and crumbling walls may retain the name of the great city. I hurried to the Frenchmen who were digging there and asked them for the ring. They replied that both the ring and the mummy had been sent to the Boulak Museum at Cairo. To Boulak I went, but only to be told that Mariette Bey had claimed them and had shipped them to the Louvre. I followed them, and there, at last, in the Egyptian chamber, I came, after close upon four thousand years, upon the remains of my Atma, and upon the ring for which I had sought so long.

"But how was I to lay hands upon them? How was I to have them for my very own? It chanced that the office of attendant was vacant. I went to the Director. I convinced him that I knew much about Egypt. In my eagerness I said too much. He remarked that a Professor's chair would suit me better than a seat in the conciergerie. I knew more, he said, than

he did. It was only by blundering, and letting him think that he had over-estimated my knowledge, that I prevailed upon him to let me move the few effects which I have retained into this chamber. It is my first and my last night here.

"Such is my story, Mr. Vansittart Smith. I need not say more to a man of your perception. By a strange chance you have this night looked upon the face of the woman whom I loved in those far-off days. There were many rings with crystals in the case, and I had to test for the platinum to be sure of the one which I wanted. A glance at the crystal has shown me that the liquid is indeed within it, and that I shall at last be able to shake off that accursed health which has been worse to me than the foulest disease. I have nothing more to say to you. I have unburdened myself. You may tell my story or you may withhold it at your pleasure. The choice rests with you. I owe you some amends, for you have had a narrow escape of your life this night. I was a desperate man, and not to be balked in my purpose. Had I seen you before the thing was done, I might have put it beyond your power to oppose me or. to raise an alarm. This is the door. It leads into the Rue de Rivoli. Good night."

The Englishman glanced back. For a moment the lean figure of Sosra the Egyptian stood framed in the narrow doorway. The next the door had slammed, and the heavy rasping of the bolt broke on the silent night.

It was on the second day after his return to London that Mr. John Vansittart Smith saw the following concise narrative in the Paris correspondence of The Times: - "Curious Occurrence in the Louvre. - Yesterday morning a strange discovery was made in the principal Eastern chamber. The ouvriers who are employed to clean out the rooms in the morning found one of the attendants laying dead upon the floor with his arms found one of the mummies. So close was his embrace that it was only with the utmost difficulty that they were separated.

One of the cases containing valuable rings had been opened and rifled. The authorities are of opinion that the man was bearing away the mummy with some idea of selling it to a private collector, but that he was struck down in the very act by long-standing disease of the heart. It is said that he was a man of uncertain age and eccentric habits, without any living relations to mourn over his dramatic and untimely end."

THE RISK PROFESSION

The men who did dangerous work had a special kind of insurance policy. But when somebody wanted to collect on that policy, the claims investigator suddenly became a member of ... THE RISK PROFESSION

Mister Henderson called me into his office my third day back in Tangiers. That was a day and a half later than I'd expected. Roving claims investigators for Tangiers Mutual Insurance Corporation don't usually get to spend more than thirty-six consecutive hours at home base.

Henderson was jovial but stern. That

meant he was happy with the job I'd just completed, and that he was pretty sure I'd find some crooked shenanigans on this next assignment. That didn't please me. I'm basically a plain-living type, and I hate complications. I almost wished for a second there that I was back on Fire and Theft in Greater New York. But I knew better than that. As a roving claim investigator, I avoided the more stultifying paper work inherent in this line of work and had the additional luxury of an expense account nobody ever questioned.

It made working for a living almost worthwhile.

When I was settled in the chair beside his desk, Henderson said, "That was good work you did on Luna, Ged. Saved the company a pretty pence."

I smiled modestly and said, "Thank you, sir." And reflected to myself for the thousandth time that the company could do worse than split that saving with the guy who'd made it possible. Me, in other words.

"Got a tricky one this time, Ged," said my boss. He had done his back-patting, now we got down to business. He peered keenly at me, or at least as keenly as a round-faced tiny-eyed fat man can peer. "What do you know about the Risk Profession Retirement Plan?" he asked me.

"I've heard of it," I said truthfully. "That's about all."

He nodded. "Most of the policies are sold off-planet, of course. It's a form of insurance for non-insurables. Spaceship crews, asteroid prospectors, people like that."

"I see," I said, unhappily. I knew right away this meant I was going to have to go off-Earth again. I'm a one-gee boy all the way. Gravity changes get me in the solar plexus. I get g-sick at the drop of an elevator.

"Here's the way it works," he went on, either not noticing my sad face or choosing to ignore it. "The client pays a monthly premium. He can be as far ahead or as far behind in his payments as he wants—the policy has no lapse clause—just so he's all paid up by the Target Date. The Target Date is a retirement age, forty-five or above, chosen by the client himself. After the Target Date, he stops paying premiums, and we begin to pay him a monthly retirement check, the amount determined by the amount paid into the policy, his age at retiring, and so on. Clear?"

I nodded, looking for the gimmick that made this a paying proposition for good old Tangiers Mutual.

"The Double R-P—that's what we call it around the office here—assures the client that he won't be reduced to panhandling in his old age, should his other retirement plans fall through. For Belt prospectors, of course, this means the big strike, which maybe one in a hundred find. For the man who never does make that big strike, this is something to fall back on. He can come home to Earth and retire, with a guaranteed income for the rest of his life."

I nodded again, like a good company man.

"Of course," said Henderson, emphasizing this point with an upraised chubby finger, "these men are still uninsurables. This is a retirement plan only, not an insurance policy. There is no beneficiary other than the client himself."

And there was the gimmick. I knew a little something of the actuarial statistics concerning uninsurables, particularly Belt prospectors. Not many of them lived to be forty-five, and the few who would survive the Belt and come home to collect the retirement wouldn't last more than a year or two. A man who's spent the last twenty or thirty years on low-gee asteroids just shrivels up after a while when he tries to live on Earth.

It needed a company like Tangiers Mutual to dream up a racket like that. The term "uninsurables" to most insurance companies means those people whose jobs or habitats make them too likely as prospects for obituaries. To Tangiers Mutual, uninsurables are people who have money the company can't get at.

"Now," said Henderson importantly, "we come to the problem at hand." He ruffled his up-to-now-neat In basket and finally found the folder he wanted. He studied the blank exterior of this folder for a few seconds, pursing his lips at it, and said, "One of our clients under the Double R-P was a man named Jafe McCann."

"Was?" I echoed.

He squinted at me, then nodded at my sharpness. "That's right, he's dead." He sighed heavily and tapped the folder with all those pudgy fingers. "Normally," he said, "that would be the end of it. File closed. However, this time there are complications."

Naturally. Otherwise, he wouldn't be telling me about it. But Henderson couldn't be rushed, and I knew it. I kept the alert look on my face and thought of other things, while waiting for him to get to the point.

"Two weeks after Jafe McCann's death," Henderson said, "we received a cash-return form on his policy."

"A cash-return form?" I'd never heard of such a thing. It didn't sound like anything Tangiers Mutual would have anything to do with. We never return cash.

"It's something special in this case," he explained. "You see, this isn't an insurance policy, it's a retirement plan, and the client can withdraw from the retirement plan at any time, and have seventy-five per cent of his paid-up premiums returned to him. It's, uh, the law in plans such as this."

"Oh," I said. That explained it. A law that had snuck through the World Finance Code Commission while the insurance lobby wasn't looking.

"But you see the point," said Henderson. "This cash-return form arrived two weeks after the client's death."

"You said there weren't any beneficiaries," I pointed out.

"Of course. But the form was sent in by the man's partner, one Ab Karpin. McCann left a hand-written will bequeathing all his possessions to Karpin. Since, according to Karpin, this was done before McCann's death, the premium money cannot be considered part of the policy, but as part of McCann's cash-on-hand. And Karpin wants it."

"It can't be that much, can it?" I asked. I was trying my best to point out to him that the company would spend more than it would save if it sent me all the way out to the asteroids, a prospect I could feel coming and one which I wasn't ready to cry hosannah over.

"McCann died," Henderson said

ponderously, "at the age of fifty-six. He had set his retirement age at sixty. He took out the policy at the age of thirty-four, with monthly payments of fifty credits. Figure it out for yourself."

I did—in my head—and came up with a figure of thirteen thousand and two hundred credits. Seventy-five per cent of that would be nine thousand and nine hundred credits. Call it ten thousand credits even.

I had to admit it. It was worth the trip.

"I see," I said sadly.

"Now," said Henderson, "the conditions—the circumstances—of McCann's death are somewhat suspicious. And so is the cash-return form itself."

"There's a chance it's a forgery?"

"One would think so," he said. "But our handwriting experts have worn themselves out with that form, comparing it with every other single scrap of McCann's writing they can find. And their conclusion is that not only is it genuinely McCann's handwriting, but it is McCann's handwriting at age fifty-six."

"So McCann must have written it," I said. "Under duress, do you think?"

"I have no idea," said Henderson complacently. "That's what you're supposed to find out. Oh, there's just one more thing."

I did my best to make my ears perk.

"I told you that McCann's death occurred under somewhat suspicious circumstances."

"Yes," I agreed, "you did."

"McCann and Karpin," he said, "have been partners—unincorporated, of course—for the last fifteen years. They had found small rare-metal deposits now and again, but they had never found that one big strike all the Belt prospectors waste their lives looking for. Not until the day before McCann died."

"Ah hah," I said. "Then they found the big strike."

"Exactly."

"And McCann's death?"

"Accidental."

"Sure," I said. "What proof have we got?"

"None. The body is lost in space. And law is few and far between that far out."

"So all we've got is this guy Karpin's word for how McCann died, is that it?"

"That's all we have. So far."

"Sure. And now you want me to go on out there and find out what's cooking, and see if I can maybe save the company ten thousand credits."

"Exactly," said Henderson.

The copter took me to the spaceport west of Cairo, and there I boarded the good ship Demeter for Luna City and points Out. I loaded up on g-sickness pills and they worked fine. I was sick as a dog.

By the time we got to Atronics City, my insides had grown resigned to their fate. As long as I didn't try to eat, my stomach would leave me alone.

Atronics City was about as depressing as a Turkish bath with all the lights on. It stood on a chunk of rock a couple of miles thick, and it looked like nothing more in this world than a welder's practice range.

From the outside, Atronics City is just a derby-shaped dome of nickel-iron, black and kind of dirty-looking. I suppose a transparent dome would have been

more fun, but the builders of the company cities in the asteroids were businessmen, and they weren't concerned with having fun. There's nothing to look at outside the dome but chunks of rock and the blackness of space anyway, and you've got all this cheap iron floating around in the vicinity, and all a dome's supposed to do is keep the air in. Besides, though the Belt isn't as crowded as a lot of people think, there is quite a lot of debris rushing here and there, bumping into things, and a transparent dome would just get all scratched up, not to mention punctured.

From the inside, Atronics City is even jollier. There's the top level, directly under the dome, which is mainly parking area for scooters and tuggers of various kinds, plus the office shacks of the Assayer's Office, the Entry Authority, the Industry Troopers and so on. The next three levels have all been burned into the bowels of the planetoid.

Level two is the Atronics plant, and a noisy plant it is. Level three is the shopping and entertainment area—grocery stores and clothing stores and movie theaters and bars—and level four is housing, two rooms and kitchen for the unmarried, four rooms and kitchen plus one room for each child for the married.

All of these levels have one thing in common. Square corners, painted olive drab. The total effect of the place is suffocating. You feel like you're stuck in the middle of a stack of packing crates.

Most of the people living in Atronics City work, of course, for International Atronics, Incorporated. The rest of them work in the service occupations—running the bars and grocery stores and so on—that keep the company employees alive and relatively happy.

Wages come high in the places like Atronics City. Why not, the raw materials come practically for free. And as for working conditions, well, take a for instance. How do you make a vacuum tube? You fiddle with the innards and surround it all with glass. And how do you get the air out? No problem, boy, there wasn't any air in there to begin with.

At any rate, there I was at Atronics City. That was as far as Demeter would take me. Now, while the ship went on to Ludlum City and Chemisant City and the other asteroid business towns, my two suitcases and I dribbled down the elevator to my hostelry on level four.

Have you ever taken an elevator ride when the gravity is practically non-existent? Well, don't. You see, the elevator manages to sink faster than you do. It isn't being lowered down to level four, it's being pulled down.

What this means is that the suitcases have to be lashed down with the straps provided, and you and the operator have to hold on tight to the hand-grips placed here and there around the wall. Otherwise, you'd clonk your head on the ceiling.

But we got to level four at last, and off I went with my suitcases and the operator's directions. The suitcases weighed about half an ounce each out here, and I felt as though I weighed the same. Every time I raised a foot, I was sure I was about to go sailing into a wall. Local citizens eased by me, their feet occasionally touching the iron pavement as they soared along, and I gave them all dirty looks.

Level four was nothing but walls and

windows. The iron floor went among these walls and windows in a straight straight line, bisecting other "streets" at perfect right angles, and the iron ceiling sixteen feet up was lined with a double row of fluorescent tubes. I was beginning to feel claustrophobic already.

The Chalmers Hotel—named for an Atronics vice-president—had received my advance registration, which was nice. I was shown to a second-floor room—nothing on level four had more than two stories—and was left to unpack my suitcases as best I may.

I had decided to spend a day or two at Atronics City before taking a scooter out to Ab Karpin's claim. Atronics City had been Karpin's and McCann's home base. All of McCann's premium payments had been mailed from here, and the normal mailing address for both of them was GPO Atronics City.

I wanted to know as much as possible about Ab Karpin before I went out to see him. And Atronics City seemed like the best place to get my information.

But not today. Today, my stomach was very unhappy, and my head was on sympathy strike. Today, I was going to spend my time exclusively in bed, trying not to float up to the ceiling.

The Mapping &Registry Office, it seemed to me the next day, was the best place to start. This was where prospectors filed their claims, but it was a lot more than that. The waiting room of MRwas the unofficial club of the asteroid prospectors. This is where they met with one another, talked together about the things that prospectors discuss, and made and dissolved their transient partnerships.

In this way, Karpin and McCann were unusual. They had maintained their partnership for fifteen years. That was about sixty times longer than most such arrangements lasted.

Searching the asteroid chunks for rare and valuable metals is basically pretty lonely work, and it's inevitable that the prospectors will every once in a while get hungry for human company and decide to try a team operation. But, at the same time, work like this attracts people who don't get along very well with human company. So the partnerships come and go, and the hatreds flare and are forgotten, and the normal prospecting team lasts an average of three months.

At any rate, it was to the Mapping &Registry Office that I went first. And, since that office was up on the first level, I went by elevator.

Riding up in that elevator was a heck of a lot more fun than riding down. The elevator whipped up like mad, the floor pressed against the soles of my feet, and it felt almost like good old Earth for a second or two there. But then the elevator stopped, and I held on tight to the handgrips to keep from shooting through the top of the blasted thing.

The operator—a phlegmatic sort—gave me directions to the Mand off I went, still trying to figure out how to sail along as gracefully as the locals.

The Mapping &Registry Office occupied a good-sized shack over near the dome wall, next to the entry lock. I pushed open the door and went on in.

The waiting room was cozy and surprisingly large, large enough to comfortably hold the six maroon leather sofas scattered here and there on the pale green carpet, flanked by bronze ashtray

stands. There were only six prospectors here at the moment, chatting together in two groups of three, and they all looked alike. Grizzled, ageless, watery-eyed, their clothing clean but baggy. I passed them and went on to the desk at the far end, behind which sat a young man in official gray, slowly turning the crank of a microfilm reader.

He looked up at my approach. I flashed my company identification and asked to speak to the manager. He went away, came back, and ushered me into an office which managed to be Spartan and sumptuous at the same time. The walls had been plastic-painted in textured brown, the iron floor had been lushly carpeted in gray, and the desk had been covered with a simulated wood coating.

The manager—a man named Teaking—went well with the office. His face and hands were spare and lean, but his uniform was immaculate, covered with every curlicue the regulations allowed. He welcomed me politely, but curiously, and I said, "I wonder if you know a prospector named Ab Karpin?"

"Karpin? Of course. He and old Jafe McCann—pity about McCann. I hear he got killed."

"Yes, he did."

"And that's what you're here for, eh?" He nodded sagely. "I didn't know the Belt boys could get insurance," he said.

"It isn't exactly that," I said. "This concerns a retirement plan, and—well, the details don't matter." Which, I hoped, would end his curiosity in that line. "I was hoping you could give me some background on Karpin. And on McCann, too, for that matter."

He grinned a bit. "You saw the men sitting outside?"

I nodded.

"Then you've seen Karpin and McCann. Exactly the same. It doesn't matter if a man's thirty or sixty or what. It doesn't matter what he was like before he came out here. If he's been here a few years, he looks exactly like the bunch you saw outside there."

"That's appearance," I said. "What I was looking for was personality."

"Same thing," he said. "All of them. Close-mouthed, anti-social, fiercely independent, incurably romantic, always convinced that the big strike is just a piece of rock away. McCann, now, he was a bit more realistic than most. He'd be the one I'd expect to take out a retirement policy. A real pence-pincher, that one, though I shouldn't say it as he's dead. But that's the way he was. Brighter than most Belt boys when it came to money matters. I've seen him haggle over a new piece of equipment for their scooter, or some repair work, or some such thing, and he was a wonder to watch."

"And Karpin?" I asked him.

"A prospector," he said, as though that answered my question. "Same as everybody else. Not as sharp as McCann when it came to money. That's why all the money stuff in the partnership was handled by McCann. But Karpin was one of the sharpest boys in the business when it came to mineralogy. He knew rocks you and I never heard of, and most times he knew them by sight. Almost all of the Belt boys are college grads—you've got to know what you're looking for out here and what it looks like when you've found it—but Karpin has practically all of them

beat. He's sharp."

"Sounds like a good team," I said.

"I guess that's why they stayed together so long," he said. "They complemented each other." He leaned forward, the inevitable prelude to a confidential remark. "I'll tell you something off the record, Mister," he said. "Those two were smarter than they knew. Their partnership was never legalized, it was never anything more than a piece of paper. And there's a bunch of fellas around here mighty unhappy about that today. Jafe McCann is the one who handled all the money matters, like I said. He's got IOU's all over town."

"And they can't collect from Karpin?"

He nodded. "Jafe McCann died just a bit too soon. He was sharp and cheap, but he was honest. If he'd lived, he would have repaid all his debts, I'm sure of it. And if this strike they made is as good as I hear, he would have been able to repay them with no trouble at all."

I nodded, somewhat impatiently. I had the feeling by now that I was talking to a man who was one of those who had a Jafe McCann IOU in his pocket. "How long has it been since you've seen Karpin?" I asked him, wondering what Karpin's attitude and expression was now that his partner was dead.

"Oh, Lord, not for a couple of months," he said. "Not since they went out together the last time and made that strike."

"Didn't Karpin come in to make his claim?"

"Not here. Over to Chemisant City. That was the nearest MRto the strike."

"Oh." That was a pity. I would have liked to have known if there had been a change of any kind in Karpin since his partner's death. "I'll tell you what the situation is," I said, with a false air of truthfulness. "We have some misgivings about McCann's death. Not suspicions, exactly, just misgivings. The timing is what bothers us."

"You mean, because it happened just after the strike?"

"That's it," I answered frankly.

He shook his head. "I wouldn't get too excited about that, if I were you," he said. "It wouldn't be the first time it's happened. A man makes the big strike after all, and he gets so excited he forgets himself for a minute and gets careless. And you only have to be careless once out here."

"That may be it," I said. I got to my feet, knowing I'd picked up all there was from this man. "Thanks a lot for your cooperation," I said.

"Any time," he said. He stood and shook hands with me.

I went back out through the chatting prospectors and crossed the echoing cavern that was level one, aiming to rent myself a scooter.

I don't like rockets. They're noisy as the dickens, they steer hard and drive erratically, and you can never carry what I would consider a safe emergency excess of fuel. Nothing like the big steady-g interplanetary liners. On those I feel almost human.

The appearance of the scooter I was shown at the rental agency didn't do much to raise my opinion of this mode of transportation. The thing was a good ten years old, the paint scraped and

scratched all over its egg-shaped, originally green-colored body, and the windshield—a silly term, really, for the front window of a craft that spends most of its time out where there isn't any wind—was scratched and pockmarked to the point of translucency by years of exposure to the asteroidal dust.

The rental agent was a sharp-nosed thin-faced type who displayed this refugee from a melting vat without a blush, and still didn't blush when he told me the charges. Twenty credits a day, plus fuel.

I paid without a murmur—it was the company's money, not mine—and paid an additional ten credits for the rental of a suit to go with it. I worked my way awkwardly into the suit, and clambered into the driver's seat of the relic. I attached the suit to the ship in all the necessary places, and the agent closed and spun the door.

Most of the black paint had worn off the handles of the controls, and insulation peeked through rips in the plastic siding here and there. I wondered if the thing had any slow leaks and supposed fatalistically that it had. The agent waved at me, stony-faced, the conveyor belt trundled me outside the dome, and I kicked the weary rocket into life.

The scooter had a tendency to roll to the right. If I hadn't kept fighting it back, it would have soon worked up a dandy little spin. I was spending so much time juggling with the controls that I practically missed a couple of my beacon rocks, and that would have been just too bad. If I'd gotten off the course I had carefully outlined for myself, I'd never have found my bearings again, and I would have just floated around amid the scenery until some passerby took pity and towed me back home.

But I managed to avoid getting lost, which surprised me, and after four nerve-wracking hours I finally spotted the yellow-painted X of a registered claim on a half-mile-thick chunk of rock dead ahead. As I got closer, I spied a scooter parked near the X, and beside it an inflated portable dome. The scooter was somewhat larger than mine, but no newer and probably even less safe. The dome was varicolored, from repeated patching.

This would be the claim, and this is where I would find Karpin, sitting on his property while waiting for the sale to go through. Prospectors like Karpin are freelance men, working for no particular company. They register their claims in their own names, and then sell the rights to whichever company shows up first with the most attractive offer. There's a lot of paperwork to such a sale, and it's all handled by the company. While waiting, the smart prospector sits on his claim and makes sure nobody chips off a part of it for himself, a stunt that still happens now and again. It doesn't take too much concentrated explosive to make two rocks out of one rock, and a man's claim is only the rock with his X on it.

I set the scooter down next to the other one, and flicked the toggle for the air pumps, then put on the fishbowl and went about unattaching the suit from the ship. When the red light flashed on and off, I spun the door, opened it, and stepped out onto the rock, moving very cautiously. It isn't that I don't believe the magnets in the boot soles will work, it's just that I know for a fact that they won't work if I happen to raise both feet at the

same time.

I clumped across the crude X to Karpin's dome. The dome had no viewports at all, so I wasn't sure Karpin was aware of my presence. I rapped my metal glove on the metal outer door of the lock, and then I was sure.

But it took him long enough to open up. I had just about decided he'd joined his partner in the long sleep when the door cracked open an inch. I pushed it open and stepped into the lock, ducking my head. The door was only five feet high, and just as wide as the lock itself, three feet. The other dimensions of the lock were: height, six feet six; width, one foot. Not exactly room to dance in.

When the red light high on the left-hand wall clicked off, I rapped on the inner door. It promptly opened, I stepped through and removed the fishbowl.

Karpin stood in the middle of the room, a small revolver in his hand. "Shut the door," he said.

I obeyed, moving slowly. I didn't want that gun to go off by mistake.

"Who are you?" Karpin demanded. The MRman had been right. Ab Karpin was a dead ringer for all those other prospectors I'd seen back at Atronics City. Short and skinny and grizzled and ageless. He could have been forty, and he could have been ninety, but he was probably somewhere the other side of fifty. His hair was black and limp and thinning, ruffled in little wisps across his wrinkled pate. His forehead and cheeks were lined like a plowed field, and were much the same color. His eyes were wide apart and small, so deep-set beneath shaggy brows that they seemed black. His mouth was thin, almost lipless. The hand holding the revolver was nothing but bones and blue veins covered with taut skin.

He was wearing a dirty undershirt and an old pair of trousers that had been cut off raggedly just above his knobby knees. Faded slippers were on his feet. He had good reason for dressing that way, the temperature inside the dome must have been nearly ninety degrees. The dome wasn't reflecting away the sun's heat as well as it had when it was young.

I looked at Karpin, and despite the revolver and the tense expression on his face, he was the least dangerous-looking man I'd ever run across. All at once, the idea that this anti-social old geezer had the drive or the imagination to murder his partner seemed ridiculous.

Apparently, I spent too much time looking him over, because he said again, "Who are you?" And this time he motioned impatiently with the revolver.

"Stanton," I told him. "Ged Stanton, Tangiers Mutual Insurance. I have identification, but it's in my pants pocket, down inside this suit."

"Get it," he said. "And move slow."

"Right you are."

I moved slow, as per directions, and peeled out of the suit, then reached into my trouser pocket and took out my ID clip. I flipped it open and showed him the card bearing my signature and picture and right thumb-print and the name of the company I represented, and he nodded, satisfied, and tossed the revolver over onto his bed. "I got to be careful," he said. "I got a big claim here."

"I know that," I told him. "Congratulations for it."

"Thanks," he said, but he still looked peevish. "You're here about Jafe's insurance, right?"

"That I am."

"Don't want to pay up, I suppose. That doesn't surprise me."

Blunt old men irritate me. "Well," I said, "we do have to investigate."

"Sure," he said. "You want some coffee?"

"Thank you."

"You can sit in that chair there. That was Jafe's."

I settled gingerly in the cloth-and-plastic foldaway chair he'd pointed at, and he went over to the kitchen area of the dome to start coffee. I took the opportunity to look the dome over. It was the first portable dome I'd ever been inside.

It was all one room, roughly circular, with a diameter of about fifteen feet. The sides went straight up for the first seven feet, then curved gradually inward to form the roof. At the center of the dome, the ceiling was about twelve feet high.

The floor of the room was simply the asteroidal rock surface, not completely level and smooth. There were two chairs and a table to the right of the entry lock, two foldaway cots around the wall beyond them, the kitchen area next and a cluttered storage area around on the other side. There was a heater standing alone in the center of the room, but it certainly wasn't needed now. Sweat was already trickling down the back of my neck and down my forehead into my eyebrows. I peeled off my shirt and used it to wipe sweat from my face. "Warm in here," I said.

"You get used to it," he muttered, which I found hard to believe.

He brought over the coffee, and I tasted it. It was rotten, as bitter as this old hermit's soul, but I said, "Good coffee. Thanks a lot."

"I like it strong," he said.

I looked around at the room again. "All the comforts of home, eh? Pretty ingenious arrangement."

"Sure," he said sourly. "How about getting to the point, Mister?"

There's only one way to handle a blunt old man. Be blunt right back. "I'll tell you how it is," I said. "The company isn't accusing you of anything, but it has to be sure everything's on the up and up before it pays out any ten thousand credits. And your partner just happening to fill out that cash-return form just before he died—well, you've got to admit it is a funny kind of coincidence."

"How so?" He slurped coffee, and glowered at me over the cup. "We made this strike here," he said. "We knew it was the big one. Jafe had that insurance policy of his in case he never did make the big strike. As soon as we knew this was the big one, he said, 'I guess I don't need that retirement now,' and sat right down and wrote out the cash-return. Then we opened a bottle of liquor and celebrated, and he got himself killed."

The way Karpin said it, it sounded smooth and natural. Too smooth and natural. "How did this accident happen anyway?" I asked him.

"I'm not one hundred per cent sure of that myself," he said. "I was pretty well drunk myself by that time. But he put on his suit and said he was going out to paint the X. He was falling all over himself, and

I tried to tell him it could wait till we'd had some sleep, but he wouldn't pay any attention to me."

"So he went out," I said.

He nodded. "He went out first. After a couple minutes, I got lonesome in here, so I suited up and went out after him. It happened just as I was going out the lock, and I just barely got a glimpse of what happened."

He attacked the coffee again, noisily, and I prompted him, saying, "What did happen, Mister Karpin?"

"Well, he was capering around out there, waving the paint tube and such. There's a lot of sharp rock sticking out around here. Just as I got outside, he lost his balance and kicked out, and scraped right into some of that rock, and punctured his suit."

"I thought the body was lost," I said.

He nodded. "It was. The last thing in life Jafe ever did was try to shove himself away from those rocks. That, and the force of air coming out of that puncture for the first second or two, was enough to throw him up off the surface. It threw him up too high, and he never got back down."

My doubt must have showed in my face, because he added, "Mister, there isn't enough gravity on this place to shoot craps with."

He was right. As we talked, I kept finding myself holding unnecessarily tight to the arms of the chair. I kept having the feeling I was going to float out of the chair and hover around up at the top of the dome if I were to let go. It was silly of course—there was some gravity on that planetoid, after all—but I just don't seem to get used to low-gee.

Nevertheless, I still had some more questions. "Didn't you try to get his body back? Couldn't you have reached him?"

"I tried to, Mister," he said. "Old Jafe McCann was my partner for fifteen years. But I was drunk, and that's a fact. And I was afraid to go jumping up in the air, for fear I'd go floating away, too."

"Frankly," I said, "I'm no expert on low gravity and asteroids. But wouldn't McCann's body just go into orbit around this rock? I mean, it wouldn't simply go floating off into space, would it?"

"It sure would," he said. "There's a lot of other rocks out here, too, Mister, and a lot of them are bigger than this one and have a lot more gravity pull. I don't suppose there's a navigator in the business who could have computed Jafe's course in advance. He floated up, and then he floated back over the dome here and seemed to hover for a couple minutes, and then he just floated out and away. His isn't the only body circling around the sun with all these rocks, you know."

I chewed a lip and thought it all over. I didn't know enough about asteroid gravity or the conditions out here to be able to say for sure whether Karpin's story was true or not. Up to this point, I couldn't attack the problem on a fact basis. I had to depend on feeling now, the hunches and instincts of eight years in this job, hearing some people tell lies and other people tell the truth.

And my instinct said Ab Karpin was lying in his teeth. That dramatic little touch about McCann's body hovering over the dome before disappearing into the void, that sounded more like the em-

bellishment of fiction than the circumstance of truth. And the string of coincidences were just too much. McCann just coincidentally happens to die right after he and his partner make their big strike. He happens to write out the cash-return form just before dying. And his body just happens to float away, so nobody can look at it and check Karpin's story.

But no matter what my instinct said, the story was smooth. It was smooth as glass, and there was no place for me to get a grip on it.

What now? There wasn't any hole in Karpin's story, at least none that I could see. I had to break his story somehow, and in order to do that I had to do some nosing around on this planetoid. I couldn't know in advance what I was looking for, I could only look. I'd know it when I found it. It would be something that conflicted with Karpin's story.

And for that, I had to be sure the story was complete. "You said McCann had gone out to paint the X," I said. "Did he paint it?"

Karpin shook his head. "He never got a chance. He spent all his time dancing, up till he went and killed himself."

"So you painted it yourself."

He nodded.

"And then you went on into Atronics City and registered your claim, is that the story?"

"No. Chemisant City was closer than Atronics City right then, so I went there. Just after Jafe's death, and everything—I didn't feel like being alone any more than I had to."

"You said Chemisant City was closer to you then," I said. "Isn't it now?"

"Things move around a lot out here, Mister," he said. "Right now, Chemisant City's almost twice as far from here as Atronics City. In about three days, it'll start swinging in closer again. Things keep shifting around out here."

"So I've noticed," I said. "When you took off to go to Chemisant City, didn't you make a try for your partner's body then?"

He shook his head. "He was long out of sight by then," he said. "That was ten, eleven hours later, when I took off."

"Why's that? All you had to do was paint the X and take off."

"Mister, I told you. I was drunk. I was falling down drunk, and when I saw I couldn't get at Jafe, and he was dead anyway, I came back in here and slept it off. Maybe if I'd been sober I would have taken the scooter and gone after him, but I was drunk."

"I see." And there just weren't any more questions I could think of to ask, not right now. So I said, "I've just had a shaky four-hour ride coming out here. Mind if I stick around a while before going back?"

"Help yourself," he said, in a pretty poor attempt at genial hospitality. "You can sleep over, if you want."

"Fine," I said. "I think I'd like that."

"You wouldn't happen to play cribbage, would you?" he asked, with the first real sign of animation I'd seen in him yet.

"I learn fast," I told him.

"Okay," he said. "I'll teach you." And he produced a filthy deck of cards and taught me.

After losing nine straight games of cribbage, I quit, and got to my feet. I was at my most casual as I stretched and said,

"Okay if I wander around outside for a while? I've never been on an asteroid like this before. I mean, a little one like this. I've just been to the company cities up to now."

"Go right ahead," he said. "I've got some polishing and patching to do, anyway." He made his voice sound easy and innocent, but I noticed his eyes were alert and wary, watching me as I struggled back into my suit.

I didn't bother to put my shirt back on first, and that was a mistake. The temperature inside an atmosphere suit is a steady sixty-eight degrees. That had never seemed particularly chilly before, but after the heat of that dome, it seemed cold as a blizzard inside the suit.

I went on out through the airlock, and moved as briskly as possible in the cumbersome suit, while the sweat chilled on my back and face, and I accepted the glum conviction that one thing I was going to get out of this trip for sure was a nasty head cold.

I went over to the X first, and stood looking at it. It was just an X, that's all, shakily scrawled in yellow paint, with the initials "J-A" scrawled much smaller beside it.

I left the X and clumped away. The horizon was practically at arm's length, so it didn't take long for the dome to be out of sight. And then I clumped more slowly, studying the surface of the asteroid.

What I was looking for was a grave. I believed that Karpin was lying, that he had murdered his partner. And I didn't believe that Jafe McCann's body had floated off into space. I was convinced that his body was still somewhere on this asteroid. Karpin had been forced to concoct a story about the body being lost because the appearance of the body would prove somehow that it had been murder and not accident. I was convinced of that, and now all I had to do was prove it.

But that asteroid was a pretty unlikely place for a grave. That wasn't dirt I was walking on, it was rock, solid metallic rock. You don't dig a grave in solid rock, not with a shovel. You maybe can do it with dynamite, but that won't work too well if your object is to keep anybody from seeing that the hole has been made. Dirt can be patted down. Blown-up rock looks like blown-up rock, and that's all there is to it.

I considered crevices and fissures in the surface, some cranny large enough for Karpin to have stuffed the body into. But I didn't find any of these either as I plodded along, being sure to keep one magnetted boot always in contact with the ground.

Karpin and McCann had set their dome up at just about the only really level spot on that entire planetoid. The rest of it was nothing but jagged rock, and it wasn't easy traveling at all, maneuvering around with magnets on my boots and a bulky atmosphere suit cramping my movements.

And then I stopped and looked out at space and cursed myself for a ring-tailed baboon. McCann's body might be anywhere in the Solar System, anywhere at all, but there was one place I could be sure it wasn't, and that place was this asteroid. No, Karpin had not blown a grave or stuffed the body into a fissure in the ground. Why not? Because this chunk of

rock was valuable, that's why not. Because Karpin was in the process of selling it to one of the major companies, and that company would come along and chop this chunk of rock to pieces, getting the valuable metal out, and McCann's body would turn up in the first week of operations if Karpin were stupid enough to bury it here.

Ten hours between McCann's death and Karpin's departure for Chemisant City. He'd admitted that already. And I was willing to bet he'd spent at least part of that time carrying McCann's body to some other asteroid, one he was sure was nothing but worthless rock. If that were true, it meant the mortal remains of Jafe McCann were now somewhere—anywhere—in the Asteroid Belt. Even if I assumed that the body had been hidden on an asteroid somewhere between here and Chemisant City—which wasn't necessarily so—that wouldn't help at all. The relative positions of planetoids in the Belt just keep on shifting. A small chunk of rock that was between here and Chemisant City a few weeks ago—it could be almost anywhere in the Belt right now.

The body, that was the main item. I'd more or less counted on finding it somehow. At the moment, I couldn't think of any other angle for attacking Karpin's story.

As I clopped morosely back to the dome, I nibbled at Karpin's story in my mind. For instance, why go to Chemisant City? It was closer, he said, but it couldn't have been closer by more than a couple of hours. The way I understood it, Karpin was well-known back on Atronics City—it was the normal base of operations for he and his partner—and he didn't know a soul at Chemisant City. Did it make sense for him to go somewhere he wasn't known after his partner's death, even if it was an hour closer? No, it made a lot more sense for a man in that situation to go where he's known, go someplace where he has friends who'll sympathize with him and help him over the shock of losing a partner of fifteen years' standing, even if going there does mean traveling an hour longer.

And there was always the cash-return form. That was what I was here about in the first place. It just didn't make sense for McCann to have held up his celebration while he filled out a form that he wouldn't be able to mail until he got back to Atronics City. And yet the company's handwriting experts were convinced that it wasn't a forgery, and I could pretty well take their word for it.

Mulling these things over as I tramped back toward the dome, I suddenly heard a distant bell ringing way back in my head. The glimmering of an idea, not an idea yet but just the hint of one. I wasn't sure where it led, or even if it led anywhere at all, but I was going to find out.

Karpin opened the doors for me. By the time I'd stripped off the suit he was back to work. He was cleaning the single unit which was his combination stove and refrigerator and sink and garbage disposal.

I looked around the dome again, and I had to admit that a lot of ingenuity had gone into the manufacture and design of this dome and its contents. The dome itself, when deflated, folded down into an oblong box three feet by one foot by one

foot. The lock itself, of course, folded separately, into another box somewhat smaller than that.

As for the gear inside the dome, it was functional and collapsible, and there wasn't a single item there that wasn't needed. There were the two chairs and the two cots and the table, all of them fold-away. There was that fantastic combination job Karpin was cleaning right now, and that had dimensions of four feet by three feet by three feet. The clutter of gear over to the left wasn't as much of a clutter as it looked. There was a Geiger counter, an automatic spectrograph, two atmosphere suits, a torsion densimeter, a core-cutting drill, a few small hammers and picks, two spare air tanks, boxes of food concentrate, a paint tube, a doorless jimmy-john and two small metal boxes about eight inches cube. These last were undoubtedly Karpin's and McCann's pouches, where they kept whatever letters, money, address books or other small bits of possessions they owned. Back of this mound of gear, against the wall, stood the air reconditioner, humming quietly to itself.

In this small enclosed space there was everything a man needed to keep himself alive. Everything except human company. And if you didn't need human company, then you had everything. Just on the other side of that dome, there was a million miles of death, in a million possible ways. On this side of the dome, life was cozy, if somewhat Spartan and very hot.

I knew for sure I was going to get a head cold. My body had adjusted to the sixty-eight degrees inside the suit, finally, and now was very annoyed to find the temperature shooting up to ninety again.

Since Karpin didn't seem inclined to talk, and I would rather spend my time thinking than talking anyway, I took a hint from him and did some cleaning. I'd noticed a smeared spot about nose-level on the faceplate of my fishbowl, and now was as good a time as any to get rid of it. It had a tendency to make my eyes cross.

My shirt was sodden and wrinkled by this time anyway, having first been used to wipe sweat from my face and later been rolled into a ball and left on the chair when I went outside, so I used it for a cleaning rag, buffing like mad the silvered surface of the faceplate. Faceplates are silvered, not so the man inside can look out and no one else can look in, but in order to keep some of the more violent rays of the sun from getting through to the face.

I buffed for a while, and then I put the fishbowl on my head and looked through it. The spot was gone, so I went over and reattached it to the rest of the suit, and then settled back in my chair again and lit a cigarette.

Karpin spoke up. "Wish you wouldn't smoke. Makes it tough on the conditioner."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry." So I just sat, thinking morosely about non-forged cash-return forms, and coincidences, and likely spots to hide a body in the Asteroid Belt.

Where would one dispose of a body in the asteroids? I went back through my thinking on that topic, and I found holes big enough to drive Karpin's claim through. This idea of leaving the body on some worthless chunk of rock, for instance. If Karpin had killed his partner—

and I was dead sure he had—he'd planned it carefully and he wouldn't be leaving anything to chance. Now, an asteroid isn't worthless to a prospector until that prospector has landed on it and tested it. Karpin might know that such-and-such an asteroid was nothing but worthless stone, but the guy who stops there and finds McCann's body might not know it.

No, Karpin wouldn't leave that to chance. He would get rid of that body, and he would do it in such a way that nobody would ever find it.

How? Not by leaving it on a worthless asteroid, and not by just pushing it off into space. The distance between asteroids is large, but so's the travel. McCann's body, floating around in the blackness, might just be found by somebody.

And that, so far as I could see, eliminated the possibilities. McCann's body was in the Belt. I'd eliminated both the asteroids themselves and the space around the asteroids as hiding places. What was left?

The sun, of course.

I thought that over for a while, rather surprised at myself for having noticed the possibility. Now, let's say Karpin attaches a small rocket to McCann's body, stuffed into its atmosphere suit. He sets the rocket going, and off goes McCann. Not that he aims it toward the sun, that wouldn't work well at all. Instead of falling into the sun, the body would simply take up a long elliptical orbit around the sun, and would come back to the asteroids every few hundred years. No, he would aim McCann back, in the direction opposite to the direction or rotation of the asteroids. He would, in essence, slow McCann's body down, make it practically stop in relation to the motion of the asteroids. And then it would simply fall into the sun.

None of my ideas, it seemed, were happy ones. If McCann's body were even at this moment falling toward the sun, it was just as useful to me as if it were on some other asteroid.

But, wait a second. Karpin and McCann had worked with the minimum of equipment, I'd already noticed that. They didn't have extras of anything, and they certainly wouldn't have extra rockets. Except for one fast trip to Chemisant City—when he had neither the time nor the excuse to buy a jato rocket—Karpin had spent all of his time since McCann's death right here on this planetoid.

So that killed that idea.

While I was hunting around for some other idea, Karpin spoke up again, for the first time in maybe twenty minutes. "You think I killed him, don't you?" he said, not looking around from his cleaning job.

I considered my answer. There was no reason at all to be overly polite to this sour old buzzard, but at the same time I am naturally the soft-spoken type. "We aren't sure," I said. "We just think there are some odd items to be explained."

"Such as what?" he demanded.

"Such as the timing of McCann's cash-return form."

"I already explained that," he said.

"I know. You've explained everything."

"He wrote it out himself," the old man insisted. He put down his cleaning cloth, and turned to face me. "I suppose your company checked the handwriting al-

ready, and Jafe McCann is the one who wrote that form."

He was so blasted sure of himself. "It would seem that way," I said.

"What other odd items you worried about?" he asked me, in a rusty attempt at sarcasm.

"Well," I said, "there's this business of going to Chemisant City. It would have made more sense for you to go to Atronics City, where you were known."

"Chemisant was closer," he said. He shook a finger at me. "That company of yours thinks it can cheat me out of my money," he said. "Well, it can't. I know my rights. That money belongs to me."

"I guess you're doing pretty well without McCann," I said.

His angry expression was replaced by one of bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

"They told me back at Atronics City," I explained, "that McCann was the money expert and you were the metals expert, and that's why McCann handled all your buying on credit and stuff like that. Looks as though you've got a pretty keen eye for money yourself."

"I know what's mine," he mumbled, and turned away. He went back to scrubbing the stove coils again.

I stared at his back. Something had happened just then, and I wasn't sure what. He'd just been starting to warm up to a tirade against the dirty insurance company, and all of a sudden he'd folded up and shut up like a clam.

And then I saw it. Or at least I saw part of it. I saw how that cash-return form fit in, and how it made perfect sense.

Now, all I needed was proof of murder. Preferably a body. I had the rest of it. Then I could pack the old geezer back to Atronics City and get proof for the part I'd already figured out.

I'd like that. I'd like getting back to Atronics City, and having this all straightened out, and then taking the very next liner straight back to Earth. More immediately, I'd like getting out of this heat and back into the cool sixty-eight degrees of—

And then it hit me. The whole thing hit me, and I just sat there and stared. They did not carry extras, Karpin and McCann, they did not carry one item of equipment more than they needed.

I sat there and looked at the place where the dead body was hidden, and I said, "Well, I'll be a son of a gun!"

He turned and looked at me, and then he followed the direction of my gaze, and he saw what I was staring at, and he made a jump across the room at the revolver lying on the cot.

That's what saved me. He moved too fast, jerked his muscles too hard, and went sailing up and over the cot and ricocheted off the dome wall. And that gave me plenty of time to get up from the chair, moving more cautiously than he had, and get my hands on the revolver before he could get himself squared away again.

I straightened with the gun in my hand and looked into a face white with frustration and rage. "Okay, Mister McCann," I said. "It's all over."

He knew I had him, but he tried not to show it. "What are you talking about? McCann's dead."

"Sure he is," I said. "Jafe McCann was the money-minded part of the team. He

was the one who signed for all the loans and all the equipment bought on credit. With this big strike in, Jafe McCann was the one who'd have to pay all that money."

"You're babbling," he snapped, but the words were hollow.

"You weren't satisfied with half a loaf," I said. "You should have been. Half a loaf is better than none. But you wanted every penny you could get your hands on, and you wanted to pay out just as little money as you possibly could. So when you killed Ab Karpin, you saw a way to kill your debts as well. You'd become Ab Karpin, and it would be Jafe McCann who was dead, and the debts dead with him."

"That's a lie," he said, his voice getting shrill. "I'm Ab Karpin, and I've got papers to prove it."

"Sure. Papers you stole from a dead man. And you might have gotten away with it, too. But you just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you? Not satisfied with having the whole claim to yourself, you switched identities with your victim to avoid your debts. And not satisfied with that, you filled out a cash-return form and tried to collect your money as your own heir. That's why you had to go to Chemisant City, where nobody would recognize Ab Karpin or Jafe McCann, rather than to Atronics City where you were well-known."

"You don't want to make too many wild accusations," he shouted, his voice shaking. "You don't want to go around accusing people of things you can't prove."

"I can prove it," I told him. "I can prove everything I've said. As to who you are, there's no problem. All I have to do is bring you back to Atronics City. There'll be plenty of people there to identify you. And as to proving you murdered Ab Karpin, I think his body will be proof enough, don't you?"

McCann watched me as I backed slowly around the room to the mound of gear. The partners had had no extra equipment, no extra equipment at all. I looked down at the two atmosphere suits lying side by side on the metallic rock floor.

Two atmosphere suits. The dead man was supposed to be in one of those, floating out in space somewhere. He was in the suit, right enough, I was sure of that, but he wasn't floating anywhere.

A space suit is a perfect place to hide a body, for as long as it has to be hid. The silvered faceplate keeps you from seeing inside, and the suit is, naturally, a sealed atmosphere. A body can rot away to ashes inside a space suit, and you'll never notice a thing on the outside.

I'd had the right idea after all. McCann had planned to get rid of Karpin's body by attaching a rocket to it, slowing it down, and letting it fall into the sun. But he hadn't had an opportunity yet to go buy a rocket. He couldn't go to Atronics City, where he could have bought the rocket on credit, and he couldn't go to Chemisant City until the claim sale went through and he had some money to spend. And in the meantime, Karpin's body was perfectly safe, sealed away inside his atmosphere suit.

And it would have been safe, too, if McCann hadn't been just a little bit too greedy. He could kill his partner and get away with it; policemen on the Belt are even farther apart than the asteroids. He

could swindle his creditors and get away with it; they had no way of checking up and no reason to suspect a switch in identities. But when he tried to get his own money back from Tangiers Mutual Insurance; that's when he made his mistake.

I studied the two atmosphere suits, at the same time managing to keep a wary eye on Jafe McCann, standing rigid and silent across the room. Which one of those suits contained the body of Ab Karpin?

The one with the new patch on the chest, of course. As I'd guessed, McCann had shot him, and that's why he had the problem of disposing of the body in the first place.

I prodded that suit with my toe. "He's in there, isn't he?"

"You're crazy."

"Think I should open it up and check? It's been almost a month, you know. I imagine he's pretty ripe by now."

I reached down to the neck-fastenings on the fishbowl, and McCann finally moved. His arms jerked up, and he cried, "Don't! He's in there, he's in there! For God's sake, don't open it up!"

I relaxed. Mission accomplished. "Crawl into your suit, little man," I said. "We've got ourselves a trip to make, the three of us."

Henderson, as usual, was jovial but stern. "You did a fine job up there, Ged," he said, with false familiarity. "Really brilliant work."

"Thank you very much," I said. I was holding the last piece of news for a minute or two, relishing it.

"But you brought McCann in over a week ago. I don't see why you had to stay up at Atronics City at all after that, much less ten days."

I sat back in the chair and negligently crossed my legs. "I just thought I'd take a little vacation," I said carelessly, and lit a cigarette. I flicked ashes in the general direction of the ashtray on Henderson's desk. Some of them made it.

"A vacation?" he echoed, eyes widening. Henderson was a company man, a real company man. A vacation for him was purgatory, it was separation from a loved one. "I don't believe you have a vacation coming," he said frostily, "for at least six months."

"That's what you think, Henny," I said.

All he could do at that was blink.

I went on, enjoying myself hugely. "I don't like this company," I said. "And I don't like this job. And I don't like you. And from now on, I've decided, it's going to be vacation all the time."

"Ged," he said, his voice faint, "what's the matter with you? Don't you feel well?"

"I feel well," I told him. "I feel fine. Now, I'll tell you why I spent an extra ten days at Atronics City. McCann made and registered the big strike, right?"

Henderson nodded blankly, apparently not trusting himself to speak.

"Wrong," I said cheerfully. "McCann went to Chemisant City and filled out all the forms required for registering a claim. But every place he was supposed to sign his name he wrote Ab Karpin instead. Jafe McCann never did make a legal registration of his claim."

Henderson just looked fish-eyed.

"So," I went on, "as soon as I turned McCann over to the law at Atronics City,

I went and registered that claim myself. And then I waited around for ten days until the company finished the paperwork involved in buying that claim from me. And then I came straight back here, just to say goodbye to you. Wasn't that nice?"

He didn't move.

"Goodbye," I said.